



# INFINITE STRATOS

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Illustration: CHOCO

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*"Wandering from ball to ball as they took on whole armies, these maidens  
gladly embraced their ash-shrouded fate to become the strongest warriors of all!"*

*Their title: Princesses of Cinders,  
Cinderellas!"*







*“Did you know?”*

*“The student council president  
is the strongest student here.”*





A version of the Russian third-generation IS “Gustoj Tuman Moskva” (“Thick Moscow Fog”) customized for Tatenashi. It stands out with a uniquely balanced fighting style based on its ability to freely control nanomachine-laced water.

Its heavy lance which internally mounts four gatling guns can also form a spiral of ultra-high-frequency pulsating water to serve as a blade. While its armor first appears to supply only limited coverage, water released from internal dispensers is shaped by the black ribbon-style crinoline frame into liquid shielding which looks like a beautiful sheer dress. The triad of crystalline bits floating above her shoulder deploy a cape-like veil of mist which wraps around her.



Unit Code:  
rmf-c\_01  
Generation: Third  
Country: Russia

Classification: Intermediate-range all-purpose IS  
Equipment: “Souryusen” (“Azure Gyre”)  
heavy lance w/four internally-mounted gatling guns  
“Rusty Nail” chain sword  
Armor: Laser-nucleated crystal plate  
Features: Explosive nanomachines

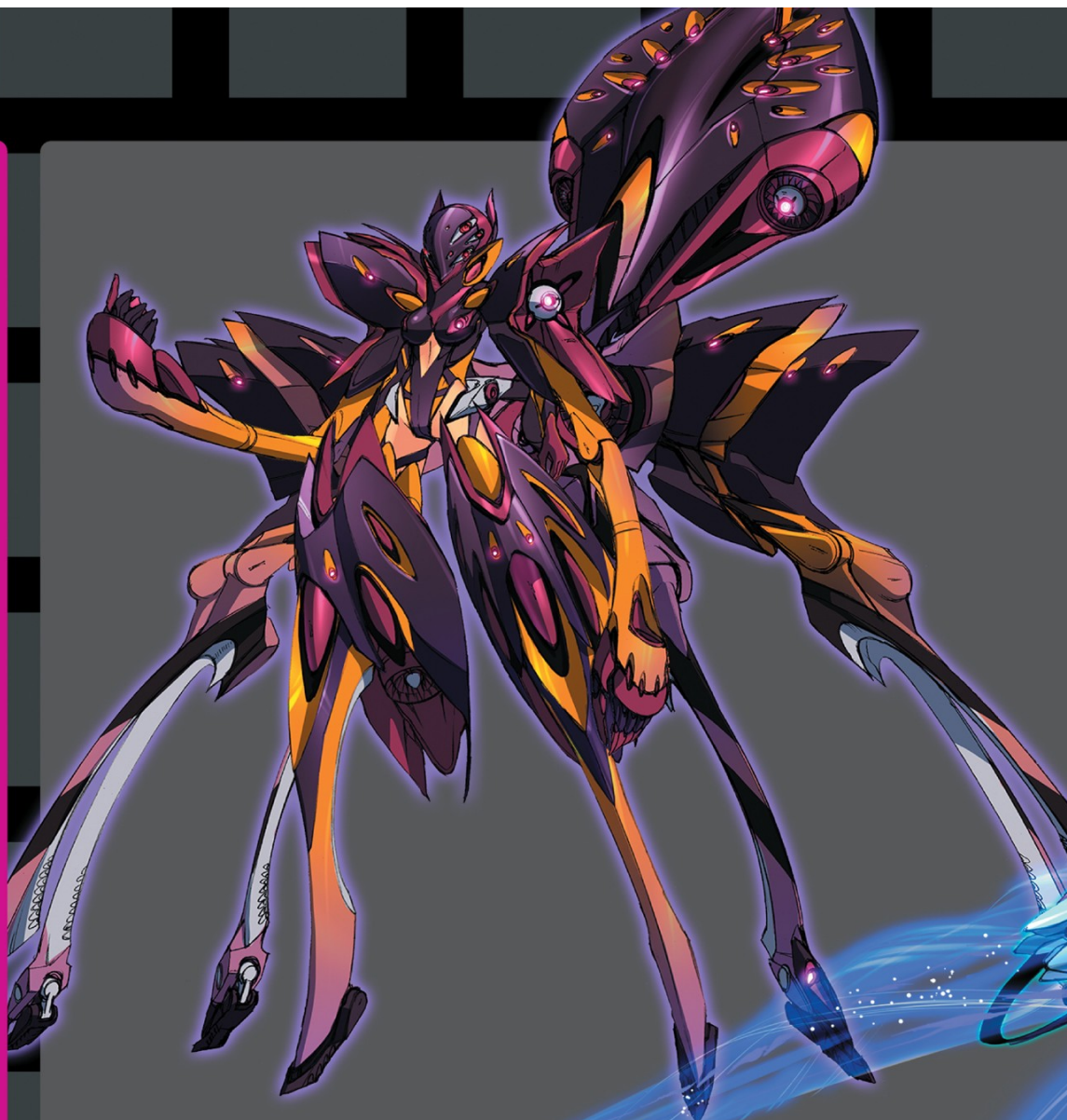




# ARACHNE



The Anatomy of Infinite Stratos



A large IS specialized into a spiderlike form with eight armored mechanical legs to increase its capabilities in close combat.

Following its capture from the Americans by Phantom Task, it has been heavily modified and upgraded. Along with its eight legs, the pilot's own arms are left free to perform attacks even while grappling.

Each leg is equipped with a blade for melee combat, a cannon, and PIC functionality. After immobilizing her foe with the adhesive energy net, the Arachne's pilot closes in to overwhelm her in hand-to-lots-of-hands combat.

Japanese Name:  
Queen of Spiders  
Unit Code: AT-004  
Generation: Second  
Country: America

Classification: Short-range melee IS  
Equipment: "Woof/Warp" leg-mounted cannons  
Norinco carbine machine gun  
"Loom Shuttle" katar x2  
Armor: Super-high-tensile woven armor  
Features: Adhesive energy net





Dan GOTANDA  
Right



Left Ran GOTANDA







## Orimura Ichika

The only male in the world who can pilot an IS.  
Personal IS: Byakushiki



## Shinonono Houki

His childhood friend.  
Personal IS: Akatsubaki



## Cecilia Alcott

English national cadet  
Personal IS: Blue Tears



## Huang Lingyin

Chinese national cadet  
Personal IS: Shenlong





### **Charlotte Dunois**

French national cadet

Personal IS: Rafale Revive Custom II



### **Laura Bodewig**

German national cadet

Personal IS: Schwarzer Regen

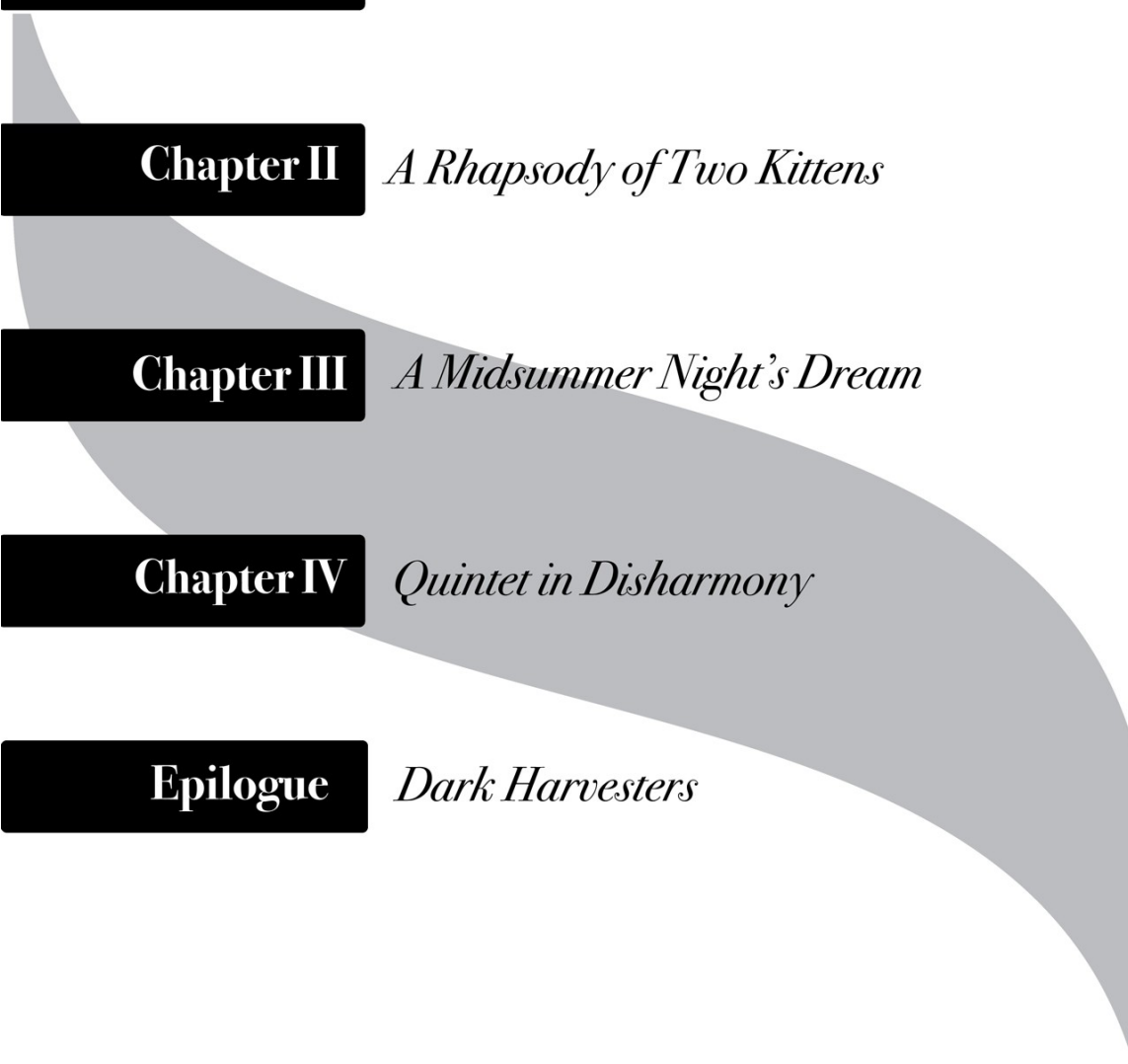


### **Sarashiki Tatenashi**

IC Academy Student Council President

Personal IS: Mysterious Lady





<b>Chapter I</b>	<i>Welcome to Summer!</i>
<b>Chapter II</b>	<i>A Rhapsody of Two Kittens</i>
<b>Chapter III</b>	<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>
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<b>Epilogue</b>	<i>Dark Harvesters</i>





# Chapter I: Heart Painkiller

"Hyah!"

A clang resounded as Ichika and Ling's blades clashed together. It was September 3rd. Classes A and B had joined up for the second semester's first live-fire exercises.

"Ugh..."

"You're not getting away, Ichika!"

They'd each taken up the banner of their class, and Ichika had come out the gate strong, but Ling had begun to claw her way back into the fight. The reason was clear and simple: Byakushiki in second shift was even more of a resource hog.

"You used your shield too much in the beginning!"

"This isn't over yet!" Ichika swung his katana as he yelled, but the glow of Reiraku Byakuya had already faded from Yukihiro Nigata, leaving it as nothing but a normal blade. Now that he was in second shift and had the Setsura weapons pack, he also had a particle cannon in his left hand, but that too was almost completely drained of energy.

"You've already lost! My Shenlong's designed to be a steady, efficient, practical fighter...! Impact cannon!" As the roar of cannon fire echoed, Ling darted away. Seizing the opportunity, she followed up by throwing the linked Souten Gagesu.

"Ugh!"

Ichika managed to parry, but the force of the impact tore his sight away from Ling. Only a moment later, his hypersensor picked her back up, but by then it was too late.

"Ungh!"

She had grabbed his ankles from below, and slung him toward the ground. The glare of the sun filled Ichika's vision, only to be blocked out by a shadow.

"Got you!"

".....?!"

Still hovering upside down, Ling opened fire again with her impact cannon. A dozen or so shots slammed into him as the bell rang to end the match. Needless to say, Ichika had lost.



"That's two wins in a row for me. Looks like you owe me lunch!"

"Man..."

I'd lost both the first battle and the runback in training today. After cleaning up, we'd gone to the dining hall like usual. Rin's smug gloating over her victories twisted the knife in me as I ate. Oh, and today's menu was mackerel in a miso sauce. The tangy white miso was an excellent accent for the tender mackerel. *Hm, yeah.* The lunch ladies had done a great job, like usual.

"How's yours, Laura? Good?"

"Yeah. I never expected I'd have a schnitzel this tasty anywhere outside of Germany."

Charl and Laura were getting along well, as usual, and Laura sliced off a bite of her veal cutlet from a plate stacked high with German cuisine.

"Want to try it?"

"You sure?"

"Mm."

"Thanks, then! You know, I've always wanted to try schnitzel."

After taking it and lifting it to her mouth, Charl lit up with a smile.

"Mmm! This is delicious! The meats are so good in German cooking."

"I guess. We're good at potatoes, too."

Laura, perhaps pleased at hearing her country praised, blushed slightly. Seeing that was enough of a cue for the other girls to all start talking about cooking as well.

"Doesn't Germany have a lot of good desserts, too? Like baumkuchen and stuff. I'm a little bit jealous, China doesn't have anything like that."

"Oh? I'll have to ask my squad to send some frankfurter kranz."

Hmm, what was that? Oh, right. A butter cake topped with caramel-covered walnuts. It's made in a ring shape, almost like a crown. Baumkuchen's a ring shape too. *I wonder why German chefs like having the hole in the middle so much?*

"You know which German dessert I'm taken with? Berliner pfannkuchen."

Charl was visibly surprised at Cecilia's favorite.

"Eh? You mean the jam-filled donuts? That vanilla icing must be loaded with calories. I'm surprised they're your thing."

"I'm fine! I keep my calories counted! Yes, as I eat a berliner I accept that nothing else will pass my lips that day..."

All the resolution of a warrior preparing to fast. *Why not just eat dessert if you want to?* Yeah... If I asked them that they'd probably all be mad.

"Well, jam-filled donuts are tasty."

Houki, as expected. I remember her always eating her donut at lunch in elementary school, even when the other girls skipped them. Yeah, if I mentioned that she'd definitely be mad.

"You like donuts, Cecilia? I should make you some sesame jian dui."

"What are those?"

"A Chinese dessert. You wrap red bean paste in rice dough and then coat it with sesame seeds. Then you fry it."

"That sounds delicious! But the calories..."

"Well, if you ever want to try it, just ask."

"You're a kinder person than I thought, Ling."

"Than you thought'? What do you mean, 'than you thought'!?"

Rin and Cecilia were just as dynamic a duo as ever.

"I like Japanese desserts, personally. They're just so elegant."

Laura seemed to love the jellies at the green tea café we'd all visited together over summer break, and she'd been back there over and over. When she told her friends back home about it, they were only able to stifle their jealousy when they realized it was getting in the way of asking her to send back raw yatsushashi. For soldiers, they certainly are very, ah, informal sometimes.

"If spring is for sugar candies and summer is for jellies, fall is for manju."

"Oh? And then what in winter?"

"Senbei."

Houki truly understood the Japanese mindset. All the talk about dessert was making me hungry. I shouldn't have been sitting around just chatting like that. I needed to think about IS. Especially about my IS, Byakushiki.

"Blah... I just got a power-up, so how'd I lose?"

"I told you, you burn too much power. It was bad enough when you had one weapon which burned shield energy, but now you've got two."

"Hmm..."

Even beyond, the enlargement of the wing thrusters had increased their energy consumption. My time in Ignition Boost was down to two-thirds, and being half again as fast was scant comfortable. Not that that ate my shield energy, but it did draw from the same pool as my particle cannon, so I needed to get better at rationing its use.

*I need to learn how to move smoothly between melee and ranged combat. I need to rethink my tactics. Then I need to get more practice shooting, get more experience with my new equipment, and... Gah! There was a mountain of things to focus on! But top priority, unchanged from First Shift, had to be getting a handle on energy usage. Energy... Hmm, energy. Where can I shave a little bit off? Sigh...*

"Well, you know! Team up with me and that problem's solved!" Houki suddenly interjected with crossed arms.

Her IS, Akatsubaki, has the one-off ability Kenran Butou which was essentially the opposite of Byakushiki's Reiraku Byakuya—it amplifies any energy, no matter how little. It was also capable of transferring energy to other IS just by contact, when most IS couldn't transfer it at all.

*Didn't Chifuyu say something about that? Like, Byakushiki and Akatsubaki are a matched pair designed to be operated in concert.* Which would also make them each other's natural counter. Byakushiki destroying energy, Akatsubaki amplifying it. Each was the key to the other's defeat...

"Why do you look so conflicted? You're my bride. You should team up with me."

Laura prodded at my right cheek. Lately she's lightened up a lot, and jokes around like this, but she still does it with a deadpan sullen look.

"Not happening. I'm teaming up with Ichika. We're childhood friends, and Shenlong is good at short and medium range so it's a good match for Byakushiki."

"Why, the nerve! If anything, then, my Blue Tears is ideal as long-ranged support. After all, isn't that Byakushiki's greatest weakness?"

"I was his childhood friend before you were! And plus, Byakushiki and Akatsubaki just... They just look perfect together..."

I couldn't quite make out the last bit of what she said, but it was obvious that Houki and the rest all wanted to team up with me. But why, though?

"Hmm. You know, we haven't even been doing team tournaments lately."

"You never know when they might announce one."

"Well, if it happens... I'll team up with Charl."

"Huh? Me?!" Charl paused with her carbonara halfway to her mouth as she suddenly became the center of attention. Putting down her fork and spoon, she fidgeted her fingers together as she looked at me querulously.

"B-But why?"

"We did before, right?"

"Oh, right..." The shine faded from her eyes as she looked dejectedly back at her plate. What was up with that?

"Sigh... I knew it'd be something like that..."

Her sigh was the signal for the other girls to turn on me.

"You're terrible."

"You just don't understand women at all, do you."

"Sometimes you're just too much of a blockhead."

"It's okay, Charlotte. Let me get you a café au lait to cheer you up."

"Thanks, Laura. Everyone." Charl's eyes lit back up as she smiled at them in gratitude. She avoided eye contact with me, though.

"I wasn't just saying it for your sake." Rin blushed a little as she folded her arms, as if it embarrassed her to say it out loud.

Charlotte chuckled, "You say that, but I know you're trying to be kind."

"Hmph!"

Charl's so good at handling girls and guys. It must be great to have that kind of charisma.

"...Why are you looking at me?"

"You must be imagining things, Houki."

"...Why are you looking at me now?"

"You must be imagining things, Laura."

My excuse wasn't enough to spare me from simultaneous karate chops from both of them.

"I don't know what you're thinking, but it has to be something rude."

*O-Of course not!*

Another pair of chops.

"Ugh..."

"Hmph."

Things kept on like that until the end of lunch, and we returned to the arena to get ready for afternoon exercises.



"This place is just too big."

The empty silence of the locker room which was all my own unnerved me. I tried to put it out of my head as I sat in my IS suit, going through Byakushiki's console. *Hmm... Setsura chews through way too much energy. I wonder if I can tone it back a bit.* As I thought that, the world went black around me. No... It literally did.

".....?!"

"Guess who!"

Eh?

Eh?

Ehh?

Who was it?

The voice from behind me was a woman, one who sounded too old to be a classmate. But the cheeky grin I could imagine from her voice was that of a kid playing a prank. The fingers covering my eyes were smooth, and a bit cold. They felt wonderful, so wonderful I couldn't respond for a few seconds.

"Time's up!" I turned around to see whose hands they were. "Who... are you?"

*It was a girl I didn't recognize. Uh... How could I have guessed, then?*

"Fufufu..."

The girl in front of me—by the color of her ribbon, she had to be a second-year—smiled at my confusion before raising a fan she'd pulled from somewhere over her face. She was definitely a strange one. Her attitude was relaxed. In a good way, a calming way. But the saucy grin on her face wiped that away.







It made me nervous, wondering what she had planned for me. She was mysterious. Almost alluring—maybe that was too positive of a way to think of it.

“And you are...? Ah—”

She was looking past me. I turned to see what she was focused on, and—

“Tricked you!” She poked my cheek with her fan.

“.....”

“Anyway. If you don’t hurry up, Ms. Orimura will be mad.”

“Eh?”

My heart sinking, I looked at the clock on the wall. I was already three minutes late.

“Whaa? Oh crap! I’m in trouble!”

I turned back to look at the person who’d made me late, but she was already gone.



“Any further explanation for your tardiness?”

Hell’s Teacher, Orimura Chifuyu, had not a shred of mercy in her heart.

“C-C’mom! I told you! A girl I didn’t recognize was—”

“Okay, so what was her name?”

“I just told you! I’d never even met her before!”

“Oh? So you’re late because you’d rather chat up new girls than make it to class?”

“Wait, no, that’s not—”

She had no interest in any further excuses.

“Dunois, show the class your Rapid Switch. If you need a target, I don’t mind if you use this idiot.”

*I mind, though!*

“.....”

Praying for a reprieve, I smiled wanly at Charl. She smiled back, like a ray of hope from the heavens. *I knew you were on my side, Charl! I knew you wouldn’t do anything like that!*

“Understood, Ms. Orimura.”

“Go ahead.”

*Bwah!* That may have been the smile of an angel, but it was definitely an Old Testament angel. She soared into the air. In her hand, a cluster of light formed into a gun.

“Uh... Charl... Charlotte?”

“What is it, Orimura?”

Ahhh! I could practically see her veins bulging in anger. *Why? Why are you angry with me, Charl?!*

“Here goes. Revive!”

“W-Wait—”

My words were drowned out in a rat-a-tat-tat of gunfire. GAHH!



"So please! Supply me with a non-energy weapon!"

"Request denied, Cecilia Alcott. Your Blue Tears will continue to gather metrics on BT weaponry. Data on kinetic weaponry is not needed at this time."

"I know that! I know, just... Ugh, why won't you listen?"

The sixth period exercise was over, and two classes of girls were packed into a locker room buzzing with conversation. A few paces away from the crowd, Cecilia had her cell phone in one hand, on an international call to her IS maintenance crew lead in England.

"Why are you so insistent on kinetic weapons, anyway?"

"Ugh..."

The reason was clear, simple... And something she absolutely didn't want to say. An IS with only BT weapons could never beat Ichika's Byakushiki. *Without a way to pierce through his energy-nullifying shield, I'll never win.*

During the afternoon exercise which combined aerial maneuvers with combat, Cecilia was the only one who'd lost to Ichika. Her pride was nearly shattered by her struggles against even the energy-hungry Second Shift Byakushiki. *Why only me?* A sigh came over the line as she scowled bitterly.

"Alcott. Your mission is to gather combat data on BT weaponry. Understood? Don't you comprehend the situation we're in after you lost your new equipment two months ago?"

"That was just—"

"I don't need to hear any more explanations. Now, if you'll excuse me."

**Click.** The dial tone hung in the air, almost sorrowfully.

"The nerve!"

Cecilia's arm whipped around as if to sling her phone at the wall.

"Cecilia? What's wrong?"

"It's... nothing."

Charlotte was the one to show concern. She'd already changed from her IS suit back into her uniform, and was drying her hair. *Charlotte's the one who has the least problem with the Byakushiki's Second Shift...* That was because almost all of her weapons used traditional ammunition, but even beyond that, she was a difficult foe.

*In terms of performance, it's Laura, then Charlotte, then Ling, then Houki, Ichika, and me...* Cecilia let out a sigh. Habitually pulling up her IS data, her heart sank at the line which read 'BT weaponry operational efficiency: 37%.' *They say at 100% I'll be able to control them like extensions of my own body, but...* She couldn't help but not believe it. *No one's ever been able to achieve that. It's all theoretical.* And Cecilia herself was the only national cadet with an A-class compatibility with BT weapons. That was why she was sent to IS Academy. That was why she had her own IS. But if she couldn't supply the data they wanted, who knew how long that would last?

"Sigh..."

"C'mon, Cecilia. Let's go get a coffee or something. You can't stay down in the dumps like this."

"I know, just..."

Worried that even that wouldn't cheer Cecilia up, Charlotte continued, "Hey, I have an idea. I'll invite Ichika and the others too. It's more fun together, right?"

"If Ichika will be there, I'll pass..."

Charlotte regretted not realizing that Cecilia's pride would never let her see her crush after losing to him, but it was too late to take it back. A few seconds later, she tried again, "Just us girls, then. C'mon, Cecilia."

"Hmm... Well, I certainly appreciate your concern. Thank you."

Cecilia walked toward her locker, her mood noticeably brightened. Her stride was as proud, as very *her*, as ever.



The next day, homeroom and part of first period were replaced with an assembly. It was, of course, about the school festival that month. *But with so many girls here...* It was noisy. Any louder, and it would be distracting.

"And now, the student council president will explain the details."

The girl who introduced her must have been one of the council members, as the buzz of conversation faded away like the tide rolling out.

"Hey, guys! What's up?"

".....?!"

I recognized the girl on stage. She was the one in the second-year ribbon who'd appeared in front of me in the locker room the day before. I managed to hold back a shout of recognition as I saw her again.

"Fufufu."

Our eyes met for a moment, and a grin sprang to her lips. Oh no. I didn't have a good feeling about this. My heart was pounding. I tried my best not to show my panic as we listened to her speak.

"You know, this year's just been so busy that I've never had a chance to introduce myself! My name is Sarashiki Tatenashi. Your student council president. Nice to meet you!"

The grin on her face was apparently as charming to girls as it was to guys, as I heard sighs well up around me.

"Anyway, for this month's school festival, we're going to have a special one-time-only rule. And that is..." She expertly pulled out her fan and drew it to the side, and as if responding to the motion, a floating holographic display opened up in midair. "The Club Battle for Orimura Ichika!"

With an audible snap, she spread her fan wide. At the same time, the display switched to a huge picture of me.

"Eh?"

"**EHHH?!**" A thunderous roar of applause broke out as the assembly realized she wasn't joking. I felt an army of eyes fall upon me.

"Let me finish. Normally, each club would propose an event of some sort, with voting held to determine which are funded by the school. But I thought

that wouldn't be as much fun as—" Her fan swung to point directly at me. "Orimura Ichika being forced to join the top club!"

Another roar of applause.

"Omigawd!"

"Prez, you're amazing!"

"We... We got this!"

"We're getting started today! Who gives a crap about the Autumn tournament?"

I mean, you should... But really, why would you want me in your club? I'm a guy, so I'd be in different groups than you at meets. And I'd make a pretty bad manager.

"You didn't even ask whether I wanted to do this..."

Still a bit confused, I looked up at Tatenashi, and she answered me with a giggle and a wink.

I didn't think a wink was enough to excuse that...

"All right! I can't wait!"

"Let's all get together after school and vote on what to do?"

"We have to get first place! Failing that, there is no failing!"

Once you set them off, there was no stopping them.

And thus, without any notice and without any agreement, the battle over me began.



The same day, we had an extra homeroom session after classes. It was an excited discussion of what to do for the festival.

"Um..."

*As class rep, it was my job to collect suggestions, but... This is all stuff like 'A host club with Orimura Ichika,' 'Play Twister with Orimura Ichika,' 'Spin the bottle with Orimura Ichika,' and 'Truth or dare with Orimura Ichika.'*

"Rejected."

The classroom echoed with dismay.

"What's wrong with you all? Who would even enjoy something like this?!"

"I definitely would!" a girl shouted out.

"Yeah! Do your job and make us girls happy!"

"Orimura Ichika belongs to us all!"

"The other classes have been all over us with ideas. Especially in my club."

"Remember, you're helping us out!"

"Endure it for our sins."

Umm. What do I even do about this? The only person I could maybe look to for help was Chifuyu.

"Seems like it's going to take you a while. I'll be in the faculty room, tell me when you're finished."

Such a kind sister.

"Ms. Yamada, we can't actually do these kinds of things, right?"

"W-Why are you asking me?"

*Oh, come on.*

"Honestly, the one with the bottle sounds nice."

A blush rose to Ms. Yamada's face. Asking her was a mistake...

"Does anyone have any more *normal* ideas?"

"How about a maid café?" Surprisingly, Laura came up with that.

"**Eh?**" I wasn't the only one surprised. The rest of the class was as well.

"It would be popular. We could earn money for the class selling snacks.

And aren't non-students able to get tickets too? They'll probably want somewhere to take a break."

She was as blunt as ever, but it still didn't sound quite right coming from her, and it took a few seconds for it to click with everyone.

"Um... What do you think?"

Laura had hoped for a majority agreement, but we were all too stunned to say anything.

"Sounds good to me. We could have Ichika be the butler or the cook," Charl followed her up, and the cover fire was just what was needed for a direct hit.

"Orimura as a butler? That sounds great!"

"That's it! You've got it!"

"Where are we getting the outfits? I do costumes for the drama club, I can sew them!"

The class suddenly erupted in a flurry of activity. Once they were started, there was no way I could stop them. *Ah well. I guess it's fine if I just think of it as a café with costumes.*

"I have a contact who can get me maid outfits. I'll see if she can lend me those and a tuxedo."

Surprisingly enough, that was Laura again. Everyone's eyes went wide in shock as they realized who was saying they'd do what.

"*Ahem*— I mean, Charlotte will."

Laura wilted, blushing in embarrassment, under the stares. Charl, meanwhile, looked confused at suddenly being the center of attention and replied with, "Er, Laura? Wait, do you mean... From last month?"

"Mm."

"I'll ask, but no guarantees..."

The class responded to her ambivalence with a "**That's okay!**" in unison. And thus, class 1-A settled on a maid—well, a 'Servant Café.'



"So... Class A has decided on a café."

I was in the faculty room, reporting to Chifuyu on what our class had chosen.

"A smart choice. So, what's the catch?"

"We'll be in costume. That's what they decided."

"Who came up with this? Tajima? Liadh? It had to have been one of those troublemakers, right?"

"Um..." Chifuyu's grin almost made me not want to tell her the truth. But I had to go through with it. "Actually, it was Laura."

Her face went blank and the room became silent as she absorbed this new information. *Ugh, this is ominous.* She blinked once, then twice... Then burst out laughing, "Ahahahahah! Bodewig? Really?! I never would have guessed that in a million years. Really? She decided on a cosplay café? Hahahaha, she sure has changed."

"You weren't expecting it to be her?"

"Of course not. Not with what she used to be like. Ahaha, Laura wanting a cosplay café..." Chifuyu dabbed tears from the corners of her eyes as she struggled to hold back her laughter. Was it really that unexpected? Even the rest of the teachers were staring at Chifuyu as if they'd never seen her do anything like this before. "Mm-hmm. Anyway, is that all?"

Noticing the looks she was receiving, she cleared her throat and regained her composure.

"Yes. That's all," I plainly replied.

"Very well, then. This requisition form is for any equipment or food you'll need. It will need to be turned in a week in advance. Understood?"

*That sounds like a lot of work...*

"Un-der-stood?" Chifuyu reemphasized.

"Yes, ma'am."

Her insistence made me subconsciously straighten my back as I answered. She'd always been a bit scary when she got like that. *But I guess she has changed.* I didn't really remember clearly, but in middle school, she always seemed so scary. Like a knife ready to cut anything it touched, no matter how close we were. *She's softened up a lot since I started high school, though. Hmm, she used to hang out a lot with Tabane back then.* The genius inventor Shinonono Tabane... Chifuyu was probably the only person in the whole world on a level with her. No, definitely. I knew it for sure.

"Oh, and remember. The school festival will have military high brass and representatives from the IS industry all over, so civilians will not be allowed—with the exception of one companion for each student. Be sure to choose yours wisely."

"Ah, yes."

Having finished reporting to Chifuyu, I took my leave and exited the faculty room. As the door clicked shut behind me, I let out a sigh.

"Hey!"

"....." A face I'd never forget was waiting for me just outside. Student council president Sarashiki Tatenashi. "...What do you want?"

"Aw, why so prickly?"

"Do you have to ask?"



She was smiling at me as if she'd never made me late and the assembly had gone perfectly normally.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I thought if I didn't make a big first impression that you'd forget about me."

"You didn't have to go that far."

I broke off and left for the arena, and she followed alongside me. It looked like she wouldn't be that easy to shake. She definitely didn't seem like someone who would take no for an answer. But at the same time, it didn't seem like she would be insistent—rather, that she'd manipulate the flow of things to get what she wanted.

"C'mon, don't be so standoffish. It's not good to shut yourself away from the world when you're young."

"And whose fault is it that I want to?"

"Hmm. How about this? I'll be your personal IS coach. Sound good?"

"I already have plenty of coaches."

Houki, Rin, Charl, and Laura. Honestly, I had my hands full with coaches.

"Aww, c'mon. I mean, I *am* the student council president."

"And?"

"Huh? Didn't you know? IS Academy's student council chooses its president by—"

Sarashiki was interrupted as another girl came running in a cloud of dust—no, charging in with a shinai raised to strike.

"Prepare yourself!" the girl exclaimed.

"Wha—" I reflexively placed myself between them, but Sarashiki dodged past me while pulling out her fan.

"Oh, no hesitation... Not bad."

Amazingly, she parried the shinai with her fan before delivering a karate chop in response. The other girl fell to the ground as a nearby window shattered.

"Now what?!" I exclaimed out of reflex.

A hail of arrows plunged toward Sarashiki. Through the broken window, I could see a girl in the next building over, clad in an archer's hakama, drawing her bow again. *What the hell is going on?*

"Let me borrow that for a minute."

She kicked the collapsed girl's shinai into the air, then grabbed it from its arc and sent it flying in one smooth motion. It soared out the window and across the courtyard, before striking the archer directly between her eyes.

"Got you!" The door to the janitor's locker burst open with a bang, and a third assassin sprung out. Her fists were wrapped in boxing gloves, and she moved with the fleet footwork of a champ as she threw her weight into each punch.

"Hmm. They're certainly enthusiastic today... Oh, by the way, Orimura Ichika."

"Uh, yes?"

"It seems like you really didn't know, so let me explain. At IS Academy, the title of student council president proves one thing." Sarashiki covered her mouth with a half-opened fan, but her excitement was still audible. Through all this, she continued to slip past each and every punch of the boxer's assault.

"The right to be student council president—the leader of all the students —" She circled around a right jab, then suddenly leapt into the air. "— belongs to the strongest."

And her foot spun around behind her before plunging into the boxer's gut like a lance. The boxer plunged back into the locker as if played in rewind.

"Got it?"

The fan she'd tossed into the air while kicking spun around once before she plucked it from the air and snapped it open, demurely holding down her hemline as she landed.

"Did you see them?"

"O-Of course not!"

"Excellent," she giggled as she closed her fan.

"So... what exactly is going on?"

"Oh? Isn't it obvious? A shrinking violet like me simply needs a knight to protect her."

That was an obvious lie.

"Didn't you just say you were the strongest?"

"Oh dear, I've been found out," she replied with another bemused chuckle. It didn't really matter, but her laughs were always so refined, and so natural. Just what kind of person was she? "Anyway, to put it simply. The student council president is the strongest, but it's open season on them. If they're defeated, the person who pulled it off becomes the new president."

"That sounds... chaotic."

"Well, there haven't really been many attempts since I became president, until now. I guess it must be—" She pulled me toward her, her face drawing closer. So close! Too close! "Your fault?"

"W-Why?!" The smell of flowers softly filled my head. My heart pounded, suddenly unable to relax.

"Hm? Ever since I announced *you* as the prize of this month's school festival, the sports and martial arts clubs that don't think they have a very good chance have turned to naked force. They think that if they depose me, they can cancel the competition and take you for themselves."

I wanted to fire back with 'You think?' but it seemed like her guesses were pretty much on the money. It felt like she was really good at reading people. Which was terrifying, because it meant she could probably tell just how hard my heart was pounding.

"Very well, then. Will you join me in the student council room for a drink?"

I sighed in reply.

"Can I take that as agreement?"

I... couldn't exactly disagree so I said, "Fine, I'll go."

"Excellent. I like it when you're honest, Orimura."

"Just call me Ichika."

"Okay. Call me Tatenashi, then. Just Tat for short."

"I'm fine either way." I let out another sigh as I shrugged. There was no arguing with her. Her face beamed with delight as she recognized my resignation. It was different from her mature smile from before. Almost childlike—almost like a child who'd just pulled off a successful prank.



"...How long are you just going to slack off like that?" came a voice from the other side of the door to the student council room.

"Iss late... Mmmm, tired..."

"Pull yourself together."

"Okay....."

I couldn't quite put my finger on why, but hearing that voice made me sigh.

"Hm? What's wrong, Ichika?"

"I feel like I recognize that voice from somewhere..."

"Oh, right. She must be here." Tatenashi opened the door. It swung silently on its hinges with a weight that suggested quality. "I'm back."

"Welcome back."

Greeting us was a third-year. She already looked the part of a serious hard worker with her braided hair and glasses, and the file folder in her hand just completed the picture. Behind her, though, was a face I didn't expect at all.

"Wow... It's Orimu..."

*It was Miss Casual. Wait, what? Really? What's she doing here?*

"Sit right down. I'll have some tea ready in a minute."

"Okay..."

Miss Casual seemed even more sleepy than usual, as her face barely lifted three centimeters from the table before seeing me and drooping back down.

"We have a guest. Get a hold of yourself."

"I can't... Tired... Wanna go home..."

"Well, that isn't happening."

Her last hopes were crushed by the stony demeanor of the third-year. To soften the blow I decided to greet the only familiar face I knew, "Oh, hey, Miss Casual! Tired again?"

"Yeah... Up all night... Every day this week... Sorting wallpapers..."

"Wall... papers?"

"Oh, wow, you two even have nicknames for each other?" Tatenashi, president despite her youth, left the making of the tea to the third-year as she sat elegantly with arms crossed.

“Actually, I just never learned her real name.”

“What?!” For the first time ever, I heard Miss Casual raise her voice as she stood. “That’s so mean! I thought you called me that because you liked me!”

“Uh... Sorry...”

Just as I slouched my head forward in guilt, the third-year returned with tea mugs and interjected, “Stop lying to him, Honne.”

“Tee-hee, you caught me. Fine, fine, sis.”

“Sis?”

“Yes. I’m Nohotoke Utsuho. My little sister here is Honne.”

“Our family’s served the Sarashikis for a long, long time. For generations.”

“Eh? So is the whole student council related in the same way, then?” I asked.

“Yes. The president, of course, is the strongest, but the others are freely chosen up to a limit. So I chose my childhood friends.” Tatenashi explained the council’s membership. *So they all grew up together, huh? I guess because their families were connected?*

“Serving the young mistress is my duty.” Utsuho, having finished with the tea, poured it into the mugs. She bore herself with all the precision of a secretary or head maid.

“Stop calling me ‘young mistress.’”

“I’m sorry. I’m too used to it.”

It seemed like the Sarashiki family was of some repute? Tatenashi’s comportment made it obvious, I guess.

“Here you are, Orimura.”

“Th-Thank you.” Utsuho’s formality made me stiffen up in response.





"Honne, could you get the cake from the refrigerator?"

"Sure thing! See, I can do a good job as long as I'm awake!"

*If you say so...* She was still as slow as ever, and she stumbled as if still in a daze. But somehow, she stayed upright as she retrieved the cake.

"Orimu, this bakery... This bakery's cakes are super, super, super, super tasty..." As she spoke, she served herself a piece as well.

"Stop that, Honne. Do you want him to think we were raised in a barn?"

"Oh, come on, it's fine. Plus, it's really tasty."

She was gleefully licking the cream from the plastic wrap, to her sister's dismay. With a dull thud, a fist interrupted her from continuing any longer.

"Oww... That hurt..."

"Would you like another? Because it's coming if you keep talking."

"I didn't even say anything..."

Tears welled up in Miss Casual's eyes.

"Yes, yes, we know just how close you two are. But right now, we have a guest," interrupted Tatenashi.

"My apologies."

"I'm sorry..."

The three then turned to me and Tatenashi spoke up first with, "Anyway, let me explain. We've received a number of complaints that you aren't in any clubs. So as the student council, we decided that you must join one."

"And that's the reason for the voting at the school festival?"

What a pain in the butt that would be. I had my hands full just with IS training. I didn't have time for clubs. I don't think I could handle a club full of girls anyway. Just mentally couldn't do it. Like, say I joined a team. Where would I change? Where would I shower?

"Yes. As compensation, I'll also be giving you special training until the festival. Both in IS and on foot."

"Thanks for the offer, but I'll have to pass."

"Don't say that. Oh, and do try the tea. It's excellent."

"If you insist..." The smell of flowers wafted to my nose. I drank slowly, letting the aroma soothe me as I enjoyed its perfect warmth. "It's delicious."

"Utsuho makes the best black tea in the world. Try the cake next."

That sounded like a good suggestion, and I helped myself to the shortcake covered in whipped cream. The cream was a luscious accent rather than overwhelming—wait, since when was I a restaurant reviewer?

"Now, will you let me teach you?"

"I don't need it. Why do you care so much about it, anyway?"

"Huh? Isn't it obvious? Because you're weak."

The words left her lips so casually and matter-of-factly that I didn't realize what she'd said at first. When it sunk in, though, I was... honestly a little bit mad.

"I definitely don't think I'm *that* weak," I rebutted.

"But you are weak. Extremely weak. And that's why I want to improve you."

I'm only human. There's no way I could stand hearing that. So before I knew it, I was on my feet, pointing at Tatenashi and said, "All right, let's fight then! If I lose I'll go along with you."

"Excellent."

The grin on her face practically screamed: "You just activated my trap card." What did I just get myself into?



"Uh, what's this?"

"Hakama?"

"I know that, I mean—"

It was after classes had let out, and Tatenashi and I were facing each other in a rush-matted dojo. Each of us were in the white gi and navy-blue hakama traditional to Japanese martial artists. Oh, and we were the only ones there. The Nohotoke sisters apparently had other work to take care of. It still amazed me that Miss Casual was on the student council.

"All right, here's how this will work. Drop me to the floor, and you win."

"Eh?"

"And if you can't keep fighting anymore, I win. Does that sound good?"

"Well, um..." I wanted to ask "Isn't that unfair to you?" but before I could get it out of my mouth, she cut me off.

"It doesn't really matter. I'm going to win anyway."

I knew she was trying to provoke me, but that doesn't mean it wasn't working. When I studied the blade at Houki's dojo, I also learned barehanded martial arts in case my sword broke. I may have been a little rusty, but once you learn that kind of skill it stays with you forever.

"Here I come," I said, as I readied myself.

"Any time, now," she replied.

The smile stayed on her face. Her cool composure made her seem even more mysterious than usual. *Anyway, let me see what I'm up against.* I dropped into a crouch and stepped toward her, reaching for her arm, and—

".....?!"

In the blink of an eye, I was flipped over and dropped to the floor. A feeling of pressure burst through my lungs, taking my breath away. I sputtered, and instantly, she was at my throat, her finger probing for my jugular.

"Ugh..."

"That's one."

As it sunk in for me that she could have killed me at will, she stepped back. *She's tough!* I realized I'd never manage to win this unless I treated it like a match with Chifuyu. But that meant I couldn't take any risks, either. I was at a stalemate.

"....."

"Mm? Aren't you coming? I suppose I'll get us started, then."



Instantly, she was upon me. Her footwork was impossibly vivid—no, was the traditional ‘no moment’ technique.

Every person alive has a rhythm. The pulse of their heart. The pace of their breath. When people are in perfect sync, it’s two hearts beating as one. When they’re very much not, one marches to the beat of a different drummer. Attacking at your own body’s rhythm is the ‘striking moment.’ Using it to shrug off blows is ‘guarding moment.’ And then, beyond that, hiding your own rhythm to become completely unreadable... Is ‘no moment.’

“Oh no—”

Three quick blows, to my elbow, shoulder, and gut. Then, the moment I stiffened in reaction, a double-palmed strike directly at my lungs. I gasped for air, as the world spun around me. And then—

“Watch your step!”

I collapsed backward onto the floor. As she threw me, she drove her finger into pressure point after pressure point, ensuring that my body wouldn’t listen even as I tried to scramble to my feet.

“That’s two. Shall we keep going?” Tatenashi, without a wrinkle on her outfit, smiled down at me.

*I’m a man, dammit! I won’t give up this easily!*

“I’m not done yet!” My words were firmer than my knees, and I wobbled as I exhaled.

“Fufu. I like boys with a bit of fire in them.”

“Thanks, I guess.”

Inside my heart, I screamed at my legs to stop shaking. Facing Tatenashi again, her smile was the same as always, but now it terrified me. It was like a deep, dense fog in a forest, concealing the way out. People aren’t afraid then because of the forest. They’re afraid because of the unknowns hidden in the fog. And her smile hid everything. It was an impenetrable iron wall. Yet it wasn’t a false smile, either. She wasn’t forcing it. I just didn’t understand where it was coming from.

*Calm down. Calm down, me. She isn’t a monster. She’s a normal human standing on two feet. There’s got to be some way to get them out from under her. I took two deep breaths. In my head, I formed the image of a steady, unwavering candle flame, and gathered my focus.*

“Hmm. Looks like you’re serious now.”

“.....”

I answered with silence, and she replied in kind. The air was thick with tension as we both prepared to go out. *I’ve got to take her down in one hit... Here goes!*

I attacked with an intensity calculated to break her silence. I moved with the secret Shinonono school technique of ‘zero moment’—moving at my foe’s pace, but a beat earlier.

“.....!”

A look of surprise flashed over her face as she took a half-step back. *I've got her!* Before her foot could touch the floor, I grabbed her by the arm and put all my might into—

***Slam!***

"Ugh!"

I plunged face-first to the ground myself. My vision blurred at I coughed uncontrollably. But through it, I refocused my determination and grasped a hold of her ankle.

"Well, well."

"I've got you now!"

I pulled her foot upward and out from under her as hard as I could, wrapping my arms around her as she began to tumble.

"Did you think it would be that easy?"

Even as I thought I had a secure grip under her arms, she planted her right hand on the floor and pivoted cleanly from my grasp. And at the same time, she unleashed a fierce capoeira kick.

"Wha—"

"It was a good try."

*Mixing traditional martial arts and capoeira?! What the hell is she?!* It was no pretense, no self-flattery, that she was the strongest. It was the stark truth. But I still wasn't going to admit defeat. Now was the time for guts. Manly determination. *My will is unbending!*

"HIYAH!"

I landed on all fours from the force of the kick and leapt forth again. She had regained her footing, and a smile sprang to her face. *Screw techniques! I just need to not lose!* I rushed forward and yanked her toward me while winding up a punch. And—

"Ah..."

"Eek!"

Her gi pulled wide open, revealing an ample bosom under her bra. The swelling mounds, wrapped in silken lace, were of a size just as impressive as Houki's— *No! I can't think about that right now!*

"Ichika, you pervert!"

"Wha—"

I had no excuse. That was 100% my fault. As my hesitation left me wide-open, she quietly pushed my arm aside. *Dammit!* In the next moment, I experienced a juggle combo for the first time. How many times was I hit? I stopped counting after the seventeenth. Because I blacked out.

"Getting to see that much will cost you, you know?"

A giggle. I could have sworn the last thing I heard was a happy giggle.



"Where on Earth did he go? Such a useless bride..."

Ichika's IS coach for the day was Laura. At the start of the second semester, Ichika had pointed out that all five working with him at once was

inefficient, so they'd set up a rotation. And for the first day of his special training, Laura's luck had landed her the slot, or at rather, a good performance in rock-paper-scissors.

*He hardly ever takes the opportunity to spend time with me. It's inexcusably rude.* Laura's irritated pacing slowed, then came to a stop. *Is... Is he avoiding me?* She shuddered, as if to shake off the sense of dread that had washed over her. *No, it's not like that! It's fine. It's fine... I think.* But once the doubt set in, it was hard for her to clear the shadow it cast over her heart. As her anxiety grew with every passing moment, she found it harder and harder to resist breaking the school rules and using the IS private channel to track down his position.

*No one's watching. I won't get caught. It's just starting up my IS and checking something, no big deal. Looking a bit guilty, Laura scanned her surroundings, for once not confident in her grasp of the situation. All right. I just need to put my IS into limited standby, and...*

She tried to calm the beating of her heart as she focused to bring forth her IS.

"You."

Laura's heartbeat echoed. "W-What?!"

Laura spun around in a rage, as much to create a distraction as anything else. But behind her was Chifuyu.

"And what are you up to?"

"Lehrerin..."

With a snicker-snack, the clipboard swung forth. "Call me 'Ms. Orimura.'"

"Understood, Ms. Orimura..."

Even Laura couldn't stand up to Chifuyu, or even wanted to, for that matter.

"Listen. I saw Ichika by the nurse's office."

"R-Really?! Which one?"

"Get a hold of yourself, it's embarrassing. The one on the first floor of the club building."

"First floor of the club building..." Laura mumbled it back to herself as if thinking it over, then gave Chifuyu a quick bow and turned to leave. Before she could go, though, Chifuyu interrupted her.

"Listen, Bodewig. Even if you've got your own IS, it's still against the rules—and a treaty violation—to deploy your IS outside of designated areas."

"I-I know!" Laura meant to sound as if she'd never considered otherwise, but a bit of residual guilt made her voice waver. "Anyway, if you'll excuse me."

"Go ahead."

Laura barely made it five meters from Chifuyu before her walk broke into a mad dash. As Chifuyu watched her speed away, all she could mutter under her breath was, "Kids today..."



***Rustle, rustle.*** The leaves sang as the breeze wafted through the branches. I was running in the blistering June heat.

*I've gotta hurry.* I didn't know why, but I knew that I did. As I ran, the sweltering heat sapped my energy. But I couldn't stop running. No, I couldn't slow down.

"Ah..."

I saw a person waiting by a well. A gorgeous woman, her hair tied back in a high ponytail, in the white and red of a shrine maiden. Something welled up in my heart, and my pace stopped. Slowly, she turned toward me, her face still hidden from my sight. I could tell she was beautiful, but I couldn't tell who she was. My heart tensed and—



"Hmm-hmm~♪ Hm-hmm-hm~♪"

A hum filled my ears as I slowly came to. *Huh...* I squinted as the sun filled my eyes. As I did so, she noticed I was awake, and leaned toward me as if to block its light with her face.

"Are you awake now?"

"Tate... nashi?"

*Tatenashi's face was close to mine. Wait, Tatenashi isn't a girl's name, is it?*

"Hm? It's the name always given to the head of the Sarashiki family. I'm the seventeenth."

"I see..." I replied with a slight nod. I was too groggy to do much more than that. *Wait... Did I ask that out loud?*

"Hey, hold on a minute!" As I realized my position, I sat up with a start. I thought it was just a soft pillow that happened to smell really nice, but in reality... "What are you doing?!"

"Resting your head in my lap."

Ugh. I mean, sure, it was obvious in retrospect, but why did she have to stare at me like I was asking a weird question? And why did she have to change clothes? It probably would've felt really nice if she still had her tights on instead. *Oh no. This is bad. I've got a really bad feeling about this. If this keeps up...* Just as I moved to back away from her, her hands came down on my shoulders.

"Wha—"

I was pressed back down into her lap. *C'mon, let me go!*

"Ichika!" The door clattered open, and Laura shouted. As she looked at me and Tatenashi, her face went blank. It's over. My short life was over. I didn't even have the willpower to watch it flash before my eyes.

"Target acquired." Laura was already activating her AIC as her IS formed around her starting from her fingertips. Before it even finished, she slashed toward us, but—

"Waaait!" I cried.

"Fufu." Tatenashi chuckled as she flung her fan toward Laura's forehead. Laura flinched for a moment as it struck an unarmored part of her. Seizing the opportunity, Tatenashi snatched it from midair, flicking it open and trailing the edge along Laura's jugular.

"Ngh—"

Neither Laura nor I could hide our surprise at the swift, graceful motion. It was already too late for Laura's emergency defenses—Tatenashi was swift enough to secure the kill before they could kick in. Laura ground her teeth, grudgingly accepting defeat.

"That's a good girl." Tatenashi patted Laura's head with her fan, then turned toward me. "Now that we've got that out of the way, let's get going."

"Huh? Where to?"

"The third arena."

Her grin seemed indomitable—or at least undefeatable.



"Huh? What are you doing here, Ichika?"

"Ichika? I'd heard you'd be training in the fourth arena today."

I hadn't been expecting Charl or Cecilia, either. They were taking a break from practice, with their IS dematerialized but their IS suits still on. As they saw me enter with Laura and Tatenashi, their eyebrows raised in unison.

"And who might that be?" Cecilia scowled slightly as she asked about Tatenashi.

*What's with that look on her face?*

"Uh, Cecilia. It's the student council president."

"Ah, I see. I was sure I recognized her face from somewhere." Charl was trying to polish the edges off Cecilia's moodiness, but only managed to turn it onto herself. She really did end up taking the heat for other people a lot...

"Relax. What did she do to you? Anyway, I'm Ichika's personal IS coach now, so we'll probably be seeing a lot of each other." Tatenashi let it drop casually, but Charl, Cecilia, and Laura were each startled.

"Huh? How'd that happen?"

"Why, Ichika!"

"Ichika, you...!"

"Wait! I can explain! It's because I lost a fight! That's all it is!" I squeezed out the excuse as fast as I could.

"He lost, and now he has to do aaaanything I say." Tatenashi giggled as she grinned. *Well, that isn't going to improve things.*

"Ichika."

"Why, Ichika!"

"Ichika!"

As expected, each of them wanted their own shot at me, and I was running out of excuses. What was I even doing here?

"Anyway, let's get started. First, I want you to follow along with someone more experienced. Charlotte. Cecilia. Show him Shooter Flow in Circle Rondo formation."

Shoo... Huh? Something about London?

"Oh? But that's a ranged battle stance."

"If you say so... Are you sure it'll help Ichika, though?"

It seems I was the only one confused about what was going on.

"Because his Second Shift has a long-ranged— A shooting attack?" Laura interjected warily. It seemed like she was still on edge around Tatenashi.

"You're clever. But I have another reason, too." Tatenashi tapped her fan in the palm of her hand as she spoke. "Normally, the most important part of ranged combat is suppressive fire. But something like a high-output particle cannon is more like a sniper rifle. One shot, one kill. However, I'm sure you're familiar with Ichika's marksmanship by now and realize that isn't his strong suit."

Man, did she have to be so blunt about it?

"Therefore, instead—"

"He needs to close to melee range."

"Correct. You're sharp, Laura." Tatenashi opened her fan as she congratulated Laura. It even had "Impressive" written on it.

*When did she swap fans?*

"Laura..." Something was up with Laura. She was staring off into space.

"Hey, Laura? You okay?"

"I'm perfectly fine! Don't look at me!" She slipped past under the hand I'd reached out to put on her shoulder, caught it, and twisted it back. *Oww! That hurts!*

"Now, if you two lovebirds could pay attention. Charlotte and Cecilia are ready to go, so watch closely." Tatenashi slapped her fan against her palm.

I'd finally managed to disentangle my arm from Laura's grip, and was still trying to rub the pain away as I turned toward the arena field.

"Here goes."

"Ichika. Watch well."

The Rafale Revive Custom II and the Blue Tears faced each other across the field.

But when they started to move, rather than rushing toward each other, they each strafed counterclockwise. Their movements formed a circle, with each IS keeping its gun trained on the other as it kept its back to the wall.

"Here I come, Cecilia."

"Ready when you are."

As they sped up, each began to fire. They kept their circular motion, sporadically accelerating to evade the other's shots. At the same time, they continued to fire, spiraling ever-faster around the arena.

"You're good, Cecilia— Ooh, close one!"

"You as well, Charlotte. I never realized a second generation IS could move so fast."



As they spoke, their fire only increased in intensity.

"This is..."

"Yeah. I thought you'd understand how impressive it was. They're maintaining precise control over their movement while firing. More importantly, they're focusing on both evasion and hitting the target. That's almost impossible if you haven't mastered your IS."

The PIC driving the IS is set to automatic control by default. However, this makes precise movement difficult. On the other hand, setting it to manual means you have to split your focus and pay attention to piloting as well. Honestly, it's something I'd been having a lot of trouble with. Staying calm, not getting caught up in my emotions, paying attention to two things at one time... Just thinking about it made my head hurt.

"You need more experience, but that's not all you need. You need precise manual control too. Understand?" came a breathy whisper entered my ear.

*When did she get behind me?!*

"I-Ichika?!"

"What are you doing?!"

The duo's voices rose uncontrollably as they turned toward me.

"Ah—"

Shortly, it was followed by an exclamation of dismay, as they were bathed in each others' fire. Because they were using manual control, the shock was enough to send them crashing into the wall.

"Are you guys okay?!"

"We're..."

"Most certainly *not*!"

They both rocketed upright and flew straight for me.

"We were taking this so seriously!"

"And there you were, fooling around!"

"I don't think I was fo—"

**"Oh yes you were!"** Cecilia and Charl resounded in unison.

"Okay, okay..."

I was trapped. Between Charl and Cecilia in a rage, grinning and chuckling Tatenashi, and a sighing Laura.

## Chapter II: The Student Council President's Sign is a Felis

I'd spent two grueling days and nights under the tutelage of Tatenashi. Now it was after school, and again I was in the third arena practicing manual control.

*"You just can't control yourself around older women, can you."*

I thought back to the sneer on Houki's face. No matter how hard I tried to convince her that it wasn't true, I didn't do any better convincing her than I had with Cecilia, Charl, or Laura. Dammit, it wasn't like that, though!

*"You're slowing down, Ichika. Focus."*

*"Understood."*

I focused on maintaining control as I turned my vision to the balloon in the center of the arena. The Setsura pack on my left arm was standing by in cannon mode. In 20 seconds, its energy recharge would be complete. My PIC was set to manual control. That meant that I'd manually have to compensate for the recoil.

*This is tougher than I thought it'd be... If I miscalculated, I'd bounce off of the wall behind me headfirst. It's hard enough just staying in Shooter Flow...* I ran through Charl's instructions in my head as I gingerly moved my—and Byakushiki's—legs.

*"It's like ice skating, I guess? You have to cling to the surface while letting yourself glide."*

*"I don't really get it..."*

*"You control yourself using centrifugal force. Does that help?"*

*"I don't get it, teach."*

*"If only I had a better student."*

*"Sorry..."*

*"Ah well. I don't mind students who're a bit of a handful. Actually, I... I kinda... Like... them."*

*"Oh, really? Thanks."*

*"You need to get better at this, Ichika..."*

*"...Huh? What just—"*

*"Oh, I just remembered, I need to go run metrics for my new equipment. See you."*

What had set her off all of a sudden? I still couldn't figure it out.

"C'mon, Ichika, focus!"

"O-Okay!"

"You must be thinking about a girl. What a perv."

"No, it's not like that!"

"Oh, a boy, then? Ewwww."

"It's definitely not like that!"

It was exhausting dealing with Tatenashi. The one thing I'd learned about her was that I hadn't learned anything about her. Some things about her seemed so mature, and on the other hand, some things were just childlike. She was like a cat who'd rub against your neck while you were sitting on the couch, but go sprinting under the bed when you lifted a hand to pet it.

It wasn't even that I didn't get her, it was that she didn't want me to. She wouldn't show herself. At least, not her true self. *And how am I supposed to deal with that?* Whatever. Right now I had to focus on piloting. I put my weight on my toes as if I was ice skating, and let my momentum carry me with small adjustments. *This is still for shooting types, though, right? What's it supposed to do for me?*

"You, there. Don't overthink it. Just stay focused."

"Sorry, Ma'am..."

At least Tatenashi is actually a really good coach. Charl and Laura aren't half-bad either, but even the parts that I couldn't quite grasp when I practiced with them, I pick up easily with Tatenashi. Somewhere I read that 'the smartest person in the room is the one who can make everyone else understand,' and she definitely seemed like that kind of person.

"Okay. You're getting up to speed. Now try using Ignition Boost."

"Eh?"

"Ignition Boost. Change over from the circular motion of Shooter Flow directly to cutting a chord through. You'll be able to break through your opponent's suppressive fire, and take a close-up shot with your particle cannon."

"W-Wait! I'm not ready to just jump into that!"

"Hurry up!"

"Y-Yes, ma'am." Rushed along, I changed my focus to readying Ignition Boost. *Hm? Oh. **Crunch!*** "Owww..."

I'd lost track of maintaining Shooter Flow, and slammed backward into the wall.

"Come on, Ichika. You need to keep up Shooter Flow while charging Ignition Boost."

"This is tough."

"Doesn't matter. You need to figure this out. Houki's the only other one who hasn't."

I had no way to argue with that.

"Okay, then get up. Give it one last try."

Her explanations may make more sense than any other coach, but she was also stricter than any of them. My training with Sarashiki Tatenashi continued.



"Why, hello there."

"Oh, hi, Nohotoke."

On my way back from training, I happened to run into Miss Casual and her sister Nohotoke Utsuho in the hall. While I was thinking about what to say, she spoke first.

"Just call me Utsuho. After all, there are two Nohotoke here, right?"

"Oh, right. Utsuho, then."

"Perfect," she nodded.

It was strange. The only way she resembled Miss Casual was in her face. *I guess she's kind of like Takatsuki.* I nodded to myself as I recalled Takatsuki Shizune, the most serious member of my class. While we were talking, I tried to slip in a question I'd been curious about.

"Mind if I ask you something, Utsuho?"

"No problem, if it's something I can answer."

"Um... What's Tatenashi like as a person?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, uh. Why'd she pick me for training?"

"You shouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth."

"I didn't mean it that way! Just..."

"I was joking," Utsuho chuckled as I ran out of words to say. It surprised me that someone like her would joke around like that. "Young mistress... Tatenashi takes an interest in many things. I don't personally know about every one of them."

"I see."

They'd know each other for a long time, but I guess they still didn't know each other perfectly. Still. The Nohotoke sisters should at least have some insight on the side of Tatenashi that me and the other IS Academy students had never seen. It was strange. *Ah well. It's not like it isn't working for me, so I should go along with what Tatenashi says.*

I asked Utsuho whether she agreed, and she replied, "I'll warn you about one thing. She absolutely will have you wrapped around her finger. Don't burn yourself out."

"I-I see..." I'd been afraid of that, but I guess it helped to have advance warning.

And if even Utsuho, who was a year older than Tatenashi, said so, it had to be true.

"So you're saying I should eat as much as I can, then."

"Exactly. But make sure none sticks in your throat."

That sounded ominous. Could Tatenashi really manipulate people that well? It sent a chill down my spine.

"See you later, then."

"Yeah, see you later."

I said goodbye to the sisters and headed back to my room.



**Click.** I dragged my exhausted body to the threshold of my room and opened the door.

"Welcome home. Would you like dinner? A bath? Or maybe... Me?"

**Slam.** I closed the door and took stock of the situation.

"Um..."

I was in the first years' dorm. In front of my room. It even said 'Orimura' on the nameplate. There was no way I was in the wrong place. No way at all. *I must have been seeing things. It's absolutely impossible that Tatenashi would be waiting for me in my room, wearing nothing but an apron. I mean, are you kidding me?* Reassuring myself, I opened the door.

"Welcome home. Would you like me? Me? Or maybe... Me?"

"At least give me a choice!"

"But I did. That's exactly one choice."

Tatenashi was waiting for me in my room, wearing nothing but an apron. What on Earth was she thinking?

"I've decided to move in here."

"Wait, what.....?"

"I'll be able to show off to everyone. Only two other girls have ever spent a night in this room. So I'll be your third woman."

"But, uh, you're a second year. How can you stay in the first year dorms?"

That wasn't my actual problem with it, but it was all I could come up with in my confusion.

"Executive privilege."

Oh no. She had to go straight to the top, didn't she.







*What's wrong with her? Is the student council even working right?*

"Your reactions are so adorable." As Tatenashi grinned, she snapped open her fan. On it was written 'Sic transit gloria mundi.'

*Um, I'm pretty sure you're the sick one.*

"Anyway! Put on some clothes!"

I didn't want to look directly at her while she was dressed like that, so my eyes darted around the room as I spoke. Tatenashi laughed as she spun around, revealing...

"Huh?!"

"Too bad! It's just a swimsuit!"

"....."

"Tee-hee. Disappointed, aren't you?"

"Of course not!"

*I think, at least.*

"This is just my revenge for not getting to show it off this summer."

*Revenge on who exactly? And that may be a swimsuit, but wow, it's not much of one... Ugh, no! I shook off the instinct to get at much of an eyeful as I could.*

"Oh dear. Are you blushing?"

"N-No..."

Tatenashi, still posing with her butt poked out of her apron to show off her swimsuit, grinned. I knew I had to be; between her calling me out on it, and just having a girl in a swimsuit in front of me to begin with, there was no way I wasn't. *She doesn't have to actually say it, though...* My face just turned redder, and I began to seriously try to figure out how to get her out of my room.

After a few seconds, though, I gave up in resignation, realizing her things were already here. She didn't just have a few boxes piled up, she'd already unpacked everything. There was no way to argue with that.

"Haaaah..." I gave a deep sigh, as if my soul itself was flowing out of me.



"This is it!" Houki strode through the halls of the first year dorms. In her hands was a wrapped box, and as she walked, she occasionally looked down at it and smiled. "This is the day!"

The first meal she'd cooked this month had come out great. So good, in fact, that the thought of Ichika's reaction as they shared it spurred her into a near-jog. *He always used to like this.* It was her mother's own inarizushi recipe. The tofu skins were just a little on the thick side, and stewed low and slow until intensely flavorful, with the rice perfectly seasoned. The intensity of the rich dark soy sauce and the brightness of the vinegared rice meant that little Ichika couldn't resist stuffing his face with them after practice.

*He's changed, though...* The Ichika in her memories was still a boy. But now, while shades of that remained, he was growing to become a calm and reliable adult. In truth, getting closer and closer to her type of man.

*Hmm. I should try to grow into more of a woman, too. I don't know what kind of woman he likes, but it can't hurt to be a bit traditional. As Houki thought to herself, she embraced her excitement.*

*Ichika had a terrible time at practice today, he needs something to cheer him up. Yeah. That's it!* That was a perfect reason to be alone with him. So perfect, Houki forgot about its one potential downfall: another girl thinking the same thing. Almost running, she was at Ichika's door in no time at all. *I just need to calm myself down...* After clearing her throat, she knocked on his door. **Knock, knock.**

"....."

*Huh, why isn't he answering?* Houki decided that she must have been too quiet, so she proceeded to knock a bit harder.

"W-Who is it?"

"It's me. I brought snacks."

"Ugh, Houki?!"

*Ugh? Did he just say ugh?!* She wasn't exactly pleased at the phrasing. But there was no point in ruining the whole meal over it, so she pressed on, "Can I come in?"

"Uh... Sorry. Not right now."

That was enough to set Houki off. In anger, she pushed against the door. But it wouldn't open. Ichika must have been holding it shut from inside.

"Ichika..."

"Listen, I'm sorry. Maybe later? But please, not right now."

Just as Houki really began to notice the tension in Ichika's voice, she heard a girl in there with him, "What are you doing, Ichika? Oh, I know. You're trying to not get caught cheating, right?"

".....!" Houki didn't recognize the voice, but that didn't matter. If Ichika was doing that, it was time to materialize Akatsubaki and slice through the door with a katana.

"Whoa!"

"Ichika, you...!"

"Hey! I can explain! This isn't what it looks like!"

"Then what is it?! Sit right down over there!"

In contrast to Houki's rage, Tatenashi was completely calm, "Calm down. I was just joking."

"....."

Houki's problem wasn't the joke. It was Tatenashi's outfit. From the front, it looked like she wore nothing at all but the apron, and Houki raised her blade in response.

"ICHIKA!"

"Why me?! Why me again?!"

Ichika barely managed to dodge the slashes, and slowly but surely he was forced back to the wall.

"Bringing a girl back to your room, and engaging in who knows what sort of lewdness... You should be ashamed of yourself!"

Her katana whooshed through the air as it swung downwards. Ichika had already accepted his death, but Tatenashi suddenly stepped between them.

"Oh my. You're quite the impulsive one."

**Clang!** The blade stopped midair, intercepted by a massive lance which materialized in Tatenashi's right hand.

".....?!"

"Sorry! But it'd be a little inconvenient for me right now if Ichika turned into Ichicorpse."

As carefree as she sounded, there was absolutely no slack in her movements.

The lance spun around, parrying the katana, then slipping over it and pressing it down before slapping it upward again.

"Wh—?!"

Houki was at a loss for words as Tatenashi nimbly twisted her katana from her hands. It spun through the air before embedding itself in the wall.

"That's that, then."

"Grr..."

Just as Laura had, Houki dematerialized her IS and submitted. Tatenashi's face wore a smug grin of superiority, over Houki and Ichika alike.



"Oh, I see. You put as much energy into everything else as you do into martial arts, don't you? So you're a good cook, too."

"I don't think I'm that good at it..."

"There's no reason to be so humble about it. Ah... The inarizushi really are great. Aren't they, Ichika?"

"Yeah. They're delicious."

After Tatenashi made it very clear to Houki where she stood, she changed back into her uniform and ate with us. They inarizushi were almost exactly like her mother's that I remembered from the dojo as a kid, but it wasn't just the nostalgia speaking—they honestly tasted really good.

"....."

"....."

Houki's withering glare made it hard to actually eat, though. She may have come to terms with Tatenashi, but she was still barely holding back her anger at me. What did I even do wrong?

"Oh? Aren't you two hungry? I guess that means more for me."

Tatenashi quickly scarfed down the remaining inarizushi. "Mmm. That was good."

She licked her fingertips before clasping her hands together and bowing her head. It carried enough unexpected gravitas that Houki and I reflexively bowed in response.

"Anyway, Houki, since you're here, let me explain something to you."

"To... Me?"

"Yes, to you. About the Akatsubaki." Houki's expression steeled instantly, and naturally Tatenashi continued without skipping a beat. "I've heard you can't activate its one-off ability, Kenran Butou."

"Well..."

Houki glared at me, as if to scream "Did you tell her?" with her eyes. I shook my head from side to side. Houki's Akatsubaki hadn't been able to use it a second time since it first managed to appear. During practice, she'd tried over and over to get it to work, but it just didn't respond at all. It showed up in the data, though, so we had no idea what the problem was.

"To put it simply, one-off abilities won't activate if the pilot's mental state isn't completely synchronized with the IS. Do you remember the time you were able to use it?"

"Yeah..."

"So if you can feel like you did then, your IS should respond."

"I-I see..."

For some reason, Houki was looking down in embarrassment. Hmm? What's up with her? Why was she darting her eyes in my direction?

"Just as an aside, the Akatsubaki's ability to amplify energy is a parallel to the Byakushiki's ability to nullify it. It can even set up an energy bypass to transfer it to others. It's clear that Professor Tabane put a lot of work into it. It's a great IS."

"Umm... Can it be used with anything other than Ichika's Byakushiki?"

"I suppose? It's not really something I can make a useful guess about. You should just give it a try."

"I see."

Houki's eyes flitted to me again. *Huh? Why? Is she worried about offending me?* As that light bulb went on over my head, I rested my hand on her shoulder and spoke, "Don't worry about it, Houki. It's more useful if you can use it on anyone, right?"

"I guess..."

For some reason, she looked disappointed. What did I do now?

"I've also noticed you have a bypass set up with Charlotte, Ichika. I was shocked when I saw it. Normally, setting one up requires a really difficult degree of synchronization with the IS core. I'm amazed that she managed to do that in combat."

"Yeah. Charl's a really good pilot. Plus, she's good with her hands, and she gets along with everyone."

"....."

**Smack!**

"Oww! Why'd you do that, Houki?"

"Hmph!"

For some reason, Houki had angrily kicked my foot as hard as she could. What had gotten into her?

"So it's complicated between you two, eh?"

"Huh?"

"There's nothing complicated about it... Ichika is just a moron."

*Moron? What do you mean, moron?* We may have known each other forever, but that's still— Owww!

"Houki! Don't pinch me!"

"Shut up." She glared at me, her eyes gleaming. Ugh, that was scary.

"Yes, yes. We know you two are close already, so let's move on to something else. But... perhaps some tea first?"

"Sure, I'll make some."

"Oh? Thank you, Ichika."

The longer I was trapped in there with Houki, the more vicious her attacks were becoming, so I took refuge in the kitchen area while I made the tea.

*Houki's moods have been wild lately.* As I heated the water, I thought about how she'd been lately. She'd started going to the kendo club, and made new friends. She was getting along better with Rin and Charl, which was good. But the reason she was here was to learn to pilot an IS, and that she was having trouble with and couldn't bring herself to accept help.

*Oh, the water's ready.* I scattered the leaves into the teapot, and as I waited for them to unfurl, I pulled out two extra mugs and warmed them. When both tasks were done, I placed them on a tray and gingerly carried them back over to the others.

"Oh, really? That's, uh... Ahahah. That's interesting."

"Isn't it. Haha."

Hmm? It seemed like they were already getting along well. While I was gone they'd started up a private conversation. I really didn't understand how girls could do that.

"What took you so long, Ichika?"

"Oh, I have some maple leaf manju as a souvenir. You two can help yourselves."

Both were all smiles for whatever reason. *Tatenashi's the type who can twist anyone, man or woman, around her finger.* The phrase 'con artist' came to mind. It'd been a nickname for Toyotomi Hideyoshi, of all people, but right now it felt like a perfect one for Tatenashi. *That's not a very cute nickname for a girl...* But if it the shoe fits, wear it, I guess. It's that or 'Cheshire cat' or 'female Tora-san.' Well, I guess not quite the last one, he may have been charming but he was too earnest for his own good.

"*Men.* Can you believe he's just sitting there staring at me?" Tatenashi tapped the manju box for emphasis.

"Er, um..."

"Hm? You're not going to claim you weren't, are you, Ichika?"

"D-Did... you just come back from vacation?"

"Oh, trying to change the subject? What do you think about that, Houki?"

"I think he should man up."

Ugh. It wasn't fair getting teamed up on like that. They could take me down in the blink of an eye.

"Anyway! Tea's ready!"

"Hahaha. He's getting flustered now."

"Indeed, we've had our fun. That's enough for now."

"I suppose. You're too kind to him, Houki."

The girls were laughing it up. Meanwhile, I was on a bed of needles.

"Anyway, to answer your question. I didn't go anywhere. An acquaintance of mine at the labs said that maple leaf manju were a great souvenir, so I've stocked up."

"The labs?"

"The development team for my IS."

"You have your own IS?"

"Of course. I mean, I am the strongest one at IS Academy."

Houki and I both tensed up a little. Tatenashi was the strongest student here even without using an IS, so her tactics with one must really be even wilder.

"Hmm. I'll have to show you sometime. I'm actually quite a good teacher."

"Really?!"

Houki was excited by the prospect. As for myself... Well, I'd already accepted her coaching.

"Of course. It's my duty to take good care of my adorable little underclassmen."

"I see. Thanks!"

"Just, one at a time, okay? Not both at once. It makes it too hard to focus."

"Okay..." Houki was obviously disappointed by that, but acquiesced. Their scrap earlier had made the gap in their capabilities very clear. Apparently, though, she still considered it more useful than training alone.

"Anyway, um. There's something I've been wondering for a little bit." Houki took a sip of tea to steady her nerves, then gestured around the room. "Aren't these your things?"

"Yes. I'll be staying here for a while."

"What?!"

Houki shot to her feet. There was nothing at all I could say to make the situation better, so I stayed quiet, even as I regretted my own gutlessness. Ugh...

"Why?!"

"Well. Since I'll be coaching Ichika, we need to be on the same page. Eat the same meals. Get the same sleep. And I need to be able to keep an eye on him constantly."

"*Keep an eye on me...*" *What am I, Tatenashi? Your pet?*

"Then I'll stay here too!" Somehow I expected Houki to say that.

"Hmm. No can do."

"Why not?!"

"This is a two-person room."

"Ugh..." She couldn't argue with that.

"Don't worry. I'll keep my hands off him."

"If... If you say so..."

"I can't guarantee he'll keep his hands off me, though~"

"What?! Ichika, you—"

"Wa-Wait! Wait! I didn't even say anything! C'mon, Tatenashi! Stop provoking her! When she gets mad, she gets violent!"

"Oh, you noticed? I'm sorry, Houki. That was a little mean of me. Tee-hee."

"I... Okay..."

Seeing that innocent grin, Houki relaxed and sat back down. The corner of Tatenashi's mouth curled up as she watched. *She really is a con artist...* And this began our tumultuous life together.



Example one.

"Heyyyy, Ichika!"

"Wha— Whoa!"

Tatenashi called me back into the room as I was brushing my teeth before bed. When I walked back through the door, she was lying on her bed with her feet kicked up in the air. Not that there was anything wrong with that. The problem was that she wasn't wearing anything but a white shirt and underwear.

*Wait, I can see her...* The curves of Tatenashi's hips were accentuated by her slender waist. They were covered—barely—by light purple panties, and as I realized just how much I could see, I retreated back into the bathroom.

"Huh? What's wrong, Ichika?"

"Y-You know what! Put some clothes on!"

"But I have clothes on."

"Pants too!"

"Aww..."

I could hear her footsteps from outside the door. *Oh no! She's getting closer!*

"That's funny, the door won't open."

"Well, of course it won't. I'm holding it shut."

"If you don't open up, the hinges are going to crack."



“Huh?” With the bright sound of metal snapping, the door collapsed in on me. *Oomph!*

“Jump!” The door leaned inward diagonally, with Tatenashi’s full weight on top of it. Ugh. “See? I’m not that heavy. I have a good figure, and I work out every day.”

“Listen, if you’re gonna toot your own horn, at least be rig—”

“Punch!”

The base of her palm struck firmly against the opposite side of the door that was pressed against my face. The shock knocked me to the floor, and she seized the opportunity to step into the bathroom. From bottom up, it was the floor, then me, then the door, then her. Man, this sucked.





"Why don't you just stop arguing with me and let me try one of those massages I've heard so much about?"

"Eh?!"

"I bet you want to know how I know, don't you? Fufu. I always I have my ear to the ground. Besides, Cecilia apparently wouldn't shut up about it."

*Dammit, Cecilia! Look what you've gotten me into!* Anyway, though, there I was. Honestly, Tatenashi did have a good figure. Not just an okay one. An amazing one. You could tell she was stacked even with her uniform on. Yet her waist tucked in nice and slender. And her butt was perfect. *Ugh, no! I can't massage her!* I was the problem. My brain was going all over. This wasn't good. This couldn't be good.

"Still don't wanna, huh? All right, how about this?"

Tatenashi flipped the door off of me, and was immediately all over me herself.

"What are you doing?"

"Mwahahaha. Coochie-coochie-coo!"

"Wha— No, wait, stop! Ahhh!"

"Now have you changed your mind yet about that massage?"

"No! I told you! I can't—"

"If you can still focus to argue, maybe I should do it harder."

"Ahhhhh! Ahahahahah! St-Sto—hahahahahah!"

"So, how about that massage?"

"O-Okay! I'll do it! I'll do it, ahahahahaha! Just stop..."

Satisfied with that response, Tatenashi finally stopped tickling me.

"You're a tough one, aren't you."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Anyway, hurry up with the massage. I'm so worn out from student council."

"But!"

"Yes, that too."

"...Did you have to?"

"Mm-hmm. I just thought it'd be amusing. Anyway..."

"Put something on down there. Or I'm not doing it."

"Down there? But I'm wearing panties already."

"Panties don't count."

"Well, that's no fun."

"All right, not doing it."

"Aww, you meanie. All right, I'll go put some pants on."

"Please do."

I looked up at Tatenashi as she left the room, and she stopped for a second to protest, "They're not panties, so it's not embarra—"

"Yes they are."

I didn't care what you called them. They were obviously panties. And please stop making me look at them. It was taking everything I had just to look away.

"How about these?"

She flipped up the hem of her shirt to reveal a pair of tight-fitting bike shorts. I could see the seams of her panties through them.

"....."

"I can see you drooling."

"I-I am not!"

I just couldn't deal with it right then. Honestly. That was all it was.

"Now, anyway. Time for my massage."

"Yes, ma'am..." Tatenashi was stretched out on the bed, and I didn't have any willpower left to argue with her. "Okay, I'm about to start."

"Mm. Thank you. Make me even more beautiful than I already am."

I didn't think just a massage could accomplish that. I mean, it was a pretty high bar to start from. *Hmm. It smells nice in here.* The room was filled with a sweet yet fresh scent, different from either Houki or Charl's. As my heart began to beat faster, I felt my hand wrap around something soft.

**Smoosh.**

*It's soft. It's so soft, and I'm still only on her legs.* They weren't just the softness of fat, though. There was well-toned muscle underneath. How should I describe it? It just felt good. Just touching it felt nice.

"Hurry up and do my butt. I've been sitting all day."

"Okay..."

There was only one way out. I needed to empty my mind! Accept the state of nothingness! Steeling myself, I moved my hand up her leg.

**Smoosh.**

"....."

It was really soft. A nice size, too.

"Ichika."

"Yeah?"

"You have a nosebleed."

"Sorry..."



Example two.

"And good luck on your midterms!"

Fourth period, part of the national curriculum rather than our training in IS piloting, had just ended, and the classroom was as lively as ever. These lessons were split up by native language, so there were only Japanese in the class. For once, I saw black hair across the entire room.

"Let's get lunch, Orimura."

"You should come with us for once."

"Yeah. It's no fair that everyone with their own IS just sticks together."

I was surrounded by girls and expected to just be dragged off to the dining hall, but then...

"Pardon me." Tatenashi stepped into the classroom, with what looked like a wrapped stack of five lunchboxes in her hand, and grinned as she walked toward me. "Why don't we eat in a classroom for once? I think it'll be fun."

She dropped the stack on my desk and grabbed a chair. At the same time, she called the other girls over, and soon I was surrounded by six or so of them. *At least Houki's here. I can get her to bail me out if things go south.* While I was thinking, Tatenashi opened a box. What in the world...

"Wow, this is incredible," I heard someone whisper. We all gasped at what was inside.

The box was packed with lobster and sea scallops. These were more than just a boxed lunch.

"How on earth did you make these?!"

"Mm? Oh, I got up early."

"That wasn't what I meant."

Something I'd learned about Tatenashi as I'd come to know her better was that, if asked how she could do something or anything like that, she'd always answer something like: "If they try hard enough, anyone can." But she was obviously some kind of genius, so whoever got told that just ended up feeling lost. *Just because people wish they could do what you do doesn't mean they can...*

"Ichika."

"Eh?"

"Open wide."

A bite of food filled my mouth. It was stuffed pepper, deftly seasoned and infused with the savory flavor of the meat. It was fine. It was wonderful. What wasn't wonderful was the reactions of the girls around me. Their breath stopped in unison as their expressions turned steely.

**"EHHH?!"**

"Orimura and the prez have that going on?!"

"I'm dead! God is dead! We're all dead! It's all over!"

"This can't be happening! I refuse to accept that this is happening!"

"It's no fair! Why do you get to look so good and get the guy?"

"I thought you were ours!"

And then there was Houki, whose fingers were twitching hard enough that her chopsticks began to creak and splinter. She gave me a glare so fierce that it would kill if it could. *You're my first childhood friend! Why does it have to be like this?!*

"What are you doing, Ichika?!"

"Well. Eating lunch."

"That wasn't what I meant!" she retorted.

"Is it tasty?" asked Tatenashi.

"Yeah, I guess."

"I want to hear the whole thing."

"That was delicious..."

As I shyly mumbled it, something in Houki snapped, and she leapt to her feet. *Whoa! Why do you have a sword?!*

"Hou-ki~"

"What?!"

"Open wide."

**Nom.** A bite of food filled Houki's mouth. As if shocked by the suddenness, she sat down and began to chew. Maybe she was just conditioned to think that eating while standing up was rude. I guess.

"Well? Is it any good?"

"Definitely. This beef stew is wonderful."

"Oh dear. You flatter me."

The other girls were as surprised by this turn of events as Houki and I were.

"Would everyone like to try some?"

"Well, uh—"

"S-Sure."

"Yes, please."

"Well, well. Looks like I'm popular today."

Tatenashi fed the other girls with a pleased smile on her face. The food was delicious, and we were being hand-fed by the beautiful student council president. Our own expressions that lunchtime must have been indescribable.



Example three.

*Phew... That was exhausting...* Especially the parts involving Tatenashi. For someone so playful, her training was incredibly strict. And she wasn't angry when I failed, so I couldn't even resent that. It just made me feel like a failure. Anyway, practice had ended, and I was taking a shower in my room before dinner.

"Hmm-hmm."

I showered my hair, rinsed it off, then stretched my hand out of the shower, reaching for my towel. *Huh? That's funny. Where'd it go? Click.*

"Hi! I'm here to wash your back!"

"Wh—?!"

Tatenashi, in a swimsuit, had suddenly opened the shower door. The deep indigo of the school swimsuit barely held in her curves. Her swelling breasts, especially, looked as if they could pop out at any—wait, I was naked!

"What are you doing?!"

"Washing your back."

"That's not what I meant! Don't look at me!"

"No need to be shy. You can let it all hang out."

"I don't want to! And why are you trying to cram yourself into this tiny room?"

"Hmm. To be closer?"

*Don't answer in the form of a question!*

"Please, just get out of here!"

"Don't say that..."

Something pressed on my back. I tensed up as I felt her breasts rub on my back through her swimsuit.

"Ahg! No! Please, just get out of here! This is really bothering me!"

"Bzzt. You're such a buzzkill sometimes."

"This isn't about— Ah!"

I felt a hand reach around me and start to trace a pattern on my chest. My voice became ragged as the sensation started to take over my mind.

"Seriously, Tatenashi! Knock it off—"

"I'll leave after I wash your back."

"....." There was no resisting her. "Fine, fine. Do whatever you want."

"Why thank you!"

*You're the one who forced me into it...* Slumping forward, I let her wash my back in the tiny shower.

"Is anywhere itchy?"

"No."

"That's too bad."

What kind of response was that? A sponge laden with body soap, no doubt Tatenashi's, lathered up my back with just the right amount of pressure. How many years had it been since I'd let someone wash my back? Probably since Chifuyu did it for me when I was little.

*Mmm...* I forced myself to not think anymore about Chifuyu. If I did, I'd think about how we bathed together too, and that was somewhere I didn't want to go right now.

"Your body is amazing, Ichika. You don't just lift, you work all your muscles."

"Thanks, I guess."

"You used to do kendo, right? How about now?"

"Nah, I've been out of it for a while. Houki absolutely smashed me just recently."

"Houki, huh. She's a pretty impressive girl. I can really tell how hard she pushes herself. Just like me."

"Are you sure about that?"

"Aww, don't be mean. I'm a hard worker. It definitely isn't from talent."

"You can keep saying that, but..."

"Hmph. If you're not gonna believe me, then... How about *this?!'*"

A soapy hand began to scratch at my armpit. It was even more effective than before.

"Ahahahahaha! Stop... Please, stop..."

"Tee-hee. See what you get for doubting me? Trust me instead, okay?"

"Sure! Fine! Understood! Just sto— Ahahahahah!"



"Okay. Anyway, I'm getting out, now that your back's washed." She stepped back briskly, rinsed the lather from herself, and opened the door. On her way out she stopped and called out to me, "Ichika."

"...What?"

"You've got a nice tight butt."

Tatenashi left the room giggling. I couldn't see her expression, but I'm sure it was a jaunty smirk.

"....."

I turned down the temperature and raised the shower head above me to, quite literally, cool my head.

"That's cold!"

Of course it was.



"Ahh..."

The usual crowd looked on with wry smiles as I slumped over the table. It was dinner time in the dining hall, but I wasn't hungry at all. Tatenashi had been running me ragged for the past few days, and I was exhausted.

"You're really working yourself hard, Ichika."

"Oh... Charl..."

"Would you like some tea? If you're not going to eat, you should at least drink."

"Oh... Thanks."

I lifted up my head to manage at least a sip. Everyone was enjoying their varied dinners. But I wasn't hungry at all... If I kept this up, it was going to kill me. Probably by starvation.

"So, where is that woman?"

Laura was a little bit prickly. Ever since she lost against Tatenashi, she'd been on edge. Her failed attempts to sneak into my room just worsened her mood further. I was kind of grateful to Tatenashi for that, at least, but... *Nothing good can come of Laura being this moody.* I slowly thought it over, in my haze. The tea Charl gave me was warm and relaxing.

"Ichika. I asked you, where is that woman?"

"Hm? She said she had student council stuff to do."

"Yeah... There's a ton of paperwork piled up," came a relaxed drawl. I slowly turned toward the direction it came from, and sure enough, it was Miss Casual. *C'mon, you're the student council secretary. You should be helping out with that.*

"You know, if I'm there, she ends up with even more to do. So I figured I'd get out from underfoot, kind of," she continued.

"Don't talk yourself down like that."

I was kind of worried about the student council, if that's how its upper echelons worked. Anyway, though, I was curious about what she'd picked for dinner, and it turned out to be ochazuke. Ochazuke with a big filet of salmon perched like on top. That was a bit showy for someone like her.

“So, how do you like ochazuke? With green tea? A nice rich black tea? Personally, I like oolong.” She sat down in an empty seat and struck up a conversation. As she spoke, her chopsticks moved quickly, mixing up the bowl. “Oh, and I like to add this.”

“This?”

“An egg.”

**Plop.** Did she really just put an egg in?





"Mix, mix, mix..." There was a warm smile of anticipation on Miss Casual's face as the dish turned even gluier. I definitely wasn't hungry after that. "Here I go. Schlurrrrp..."

"Umm. You don't have to make that much noise when you eat."

"Aww, yeah I do! You're supposed to slurp!"

"That's for soba noodles!"

"Okay, okay, I'll try. *Sluuurp.*"

Sigh. At least it was a little quieter. Anyway, what was I thinking about again?

"Ahem. Ichika?"

"Huh? What is it, Cecilia? Why so formal?"

"If you can no longer bear to be in that room, I simply must offer, as a matter of both honor and mercy, my own instead."

Oh, the room with one big bed and very little else.

"Hey, wait, Cecilia! Hold it right there. Ichika, you should come to my room. I have playing cards!" said Rin, a bit too excitedly.

"What do you think I am, an elementary schooler?"

"I have rock candy too."

"A preschooler, then?!"

*It just got worse and worse. Rin, sometimes I really don't get you.*

"How about popcorn, then?"

"A pigeon?!"

Just... whatever. All this was doing was wearing me out even more.

"I'm going back to my room."

Glumly, I stood up and walked out of the cafeteria. At least I could get a nap in before Tatenashi gets back, I thought. I turned the doorknob, looking forward to that faint solace.

"Welcome back. Would you like a bath? Dinner? Or maybe... Me?"

Two seconds after I turned the knob, I heard Tatenashi. The sheer dejection made me crumple to my knees.

## Chapter III: Glass-Clear Chord of Cinderellas' Slippers

Finally, it was the day of the school festival. It wasn't open to the public, so there wouldn't be fireworks or anything, but emotionally everyone there was about to explode.

"Seriously? Class 1's having Ichika as a host?"

"He'll be in a butler's tuxedo and everything!"

"And I heard you get to play a game with him."

"If you win, you get a photo with him! Just him and you! There's no way I'm gonna miss that!"

Class 1-A's 'Servant Café' was packed as soon as it opened. I'm the only one really getting worked hard, though. Everyone else is just having fun.

"Welcome! Right this way, madam."

The happiest was probably Charl, wearing a maid's uniform, who'd had a wide grin on her face all day. Probably because I told her it looked good on her. I didn't expect her to get that pumped up about it though. The hosts and hostesses—that is, the group in cosplay—were me, Charl, Cecilia, and unexpectedly, Houki and Laura. *I guess Laura makes sense since it was her idea, but I'm surprised Houki gave in.* I never would have expected it in a million years. *She looks so sour as she leads people in. Especially when they ask how long the line is for me. Is she getting enough calcium? Anyway, uhh...*

Watching them all work in their maid uniforms was really getting me excited in a way I couldn't quite pin down. Dan always used to say: "Maid uniforms, school swimsuits, and bloomers! If those don't turn you on, turn in your man card!" Perhaps there was some validity to that. Maybe. Hmm. Anyway, the rest of the class was split into two groups. One was cooking, and the other was taking care of everything else. They were kept busy with stuff like getting ingredients when we ran out and bussing tables. The hardest of their tasks, though, was dealing with the huge line that had formed in the hallway.

"I've been waiting two hours already!"

"Don't worry. We'll be open for the whole school festival."

Dealing with all the complaints—most of which seemed to be about the wait time—looked like hard work. *The line's already pretty long. Are we gonna make it through the day?* As I pondered it, I looked out past them to the hall.

"I'm the end of the line."

"What games do they do?"

"It looks like rock-paper-scissors, Concentration, and darts. So if you're not good at any one of them, you can pick something you're better at."

"We're still waiting?"

The hall outside the first year classrooms was a lake, a sea, an ocean of people. I could only imagine the trepidation everyone else in the class felt looking out at it.

"Look! There's Orimura!"

*Dammit! They saw me!* As soon as I realized it, the crew handling the line moved to shoo me back into the classroom.

"We told you, no leaving!"

"Look at the mess you're making!"

"Everyone needs to get their chance."

Huh? Just how many people was 'everyone'?

"Don't worry about it, just get back in there!"

I couldn't argue with that. So I didn't.

"You, there, butler. Show me to my table."

That sounds like— I knew that harsh tone. I knew that just-a-little-bitchy word choice. I turned around, and sure enough, it was Rin, but...

"What are you staring at?"

It was Rin in a qipao. The traditional dress was sewn from a single piece of cloth, cut to a skirt, with slits which rose daringly high. On its crimson fabric, a dragon sprawled forth. Its seams and hems were painstakingly detailed in gold.

"Seriously, stop it! It's just because my class is doing a Chinese-style café!"

"Oh? You have dim sum?"

"They made me be the waitress, and I don't even get to do anything because everyone's coming here!" My second childhood friend was a bit resentful.

"Really? Oh, hey. That's not your normal hairstyle. What do you call those buns?"

"Ugh, they're called chignon."

"Yeah, those. They look good on you."

"Uh. Well, I mean, they are the traditional Chinese style."

*Huh? Why couldn't she take a compliment?*

"Anyway! Show me to my table!"

"Sure, sure. Right this way, madam."

"Mada—?!"

"All of our customers are called that."

"Hmph! I guess if they're making you call people that, you have to. As long as they're making you do it."

*What's that supposed to mean?* It was a bit naive of a question, but I thought it over as I lead Rin to an empty table. The furniture, by the way, was far beyond what you'd expect for a school festival. Cecilia had supplied it, and I especially had to wonder just how much tables and chairs cost. And the tea sets, too. I could see the cooks trying their hardest not to slip.

"So, madam. What will your order be?"

"Well..."

Rin squirmed in her seat, apparently unused to such fancy furniture. After settling down, she turned her attention to the menu. Of course, it's impolite to force our customers to hold the menu themselves, so it fell to us to hold it for them. It was a little bit scary how quickly I got used to it...

“What’s the ‘Reward for the Butler’ meal?”







"Um... May I interest you in one of our cakes?"

"Don't change the subject."

"My apologies."

"Stop being so stiff. It feels creepy."

"Wha— Who are you calling creepy?! This is what butlers do!"

"A butler? Then I'll take the 'Reward for the Butler' meal."

"Well, uh... Perhaps you'd like to try the 'Reward for the Maid' meal?"

"Ichika. This meal involves you, doesn't it."

I nervously hiccuped and replied, "You have such a wit, my lady."

"If you're going to be that subservient, then actually listen to what I say! I want the 'Reward for the Butler' meal."

I couldn't say no to those upturned eyes for a third time. I had to go along with it. Though she seemed to be pretty embarrassed by it, too. Was it just because of the name? C'mon, Rin. There's far worse. You haven't even gotten to things like the 'Song of a Nightingale by the Lake' or 'Echoes of Romance in the Deep Forest.' Ugh, just repeating those back made me feel weird.

"One 'Reward for the Butler' meal, then. It will be just a moment."

I bowed deeply, from the hips, and stepped away from the madam—from Rin. There was no need for me to carry the order to the kitchen, though. I was wearing a lapel mic disguised as a brooch. That's the kind of thing only a woman would think of.

"Here you go."

Reaching the kitchen, I was handed the 'Reward for the Butler' meal. It was an iced herbal tea and a package of Pocky, for only 300 yen. Our customers' smiles were a greater treasure than any gold. Yet still, I was filled with trepidation as I made my way back to the table where the girl in the qipao awaited.

"My apologies for the wait, madam."

"Mm. I suppose I can forgive it, once or twice."

*Jeez. Getting a bit too into the role, there. And still not quite nailing it.*

"Now, if you'll pardon me."

"Eh?"

I sat facing Rin across the table for two. Me in my tuxedo, her in her qipao... was how the scene was set.

"Why are you sitting down? Oh well, it doesn't matter."

"Allow me to explain."

"Oh? As you will."

"Ugh! I can't do this! Rin, can we just talk normally?"

"Ahahah. You were talking a bit funny there. Very well."

*Oh, like you weren't?*

"What is this meal? It looks like just a snack and a drink."

"The thing with it is, you're allowed to feed me."

"What?"

"That's why it's 'for the butler.'"

Rin blinked, and her cheeks flushed bright red. After a moment she stuttered out, "S-So what is this? I have to pay to feed you?"

"Unfortunately, we don't take cancellations. That's why I wasn't so hot on it."

"No, just, um... Since I ordered it..." Her voice sank into a mumble.

"What's wrong, Rin? It's up to you. You don't have to feed me if you don't want to. I can just leave."

"Eh? No, that'd be a waste! Just this once, I suppose I'll give you your reward."

*Huh? It's not like I was that excited about it, either.* Rin picked up a stick of Pocky and pointed it at me. As she looked off to the side she said, "Here's your reward. Say 'ahh.'"

"Don't look away like that, all the other girls are looking. If you're too embarrassed, we don't have to go through with this."

"I-I'll do it! I said I'd do it! Jeez! Give me what I paid for!"

"Okay. You don't have to get so angry."

"All right. Say 'ahh.'"

"Ahh."

The sound of it snapping as I bit down echoed in my mouth. It was served in a chilled parfait glass, so rather than melting immediately, the chocolate stayed as a light film between my tongue and the pretzel. Only a few seconds later did it fill my palate.

"All right, now that I've fed you, it's my—"

"My apologies, *madam*, but we do not offer that service." Houki, in a maid's uniform, interrupted Rin halfway through her sentence. The expression on her face was terrifying.

"Yeah, you're right. Fine..."

"....."

"C'mon, Houki. That's enough. Table 3 has an order ready for you."

"I know." She spun away with a snort.

"I wonder what she's so angry about?"

"Beats me."

Rin was nibbling away at her Pocky with a blush on her face. The downward tilt of her head made her look like a squirrel. It was cute.

"Rin."

"Huh?"

"You look cute like that."

**Phbbbt!** A jet of iced tea came out of her mouth, and she started coughing heavily.

"Hey, are you okay?"

"Where'd that come from all of a sudden?"

"Oh, just when you were eating the Pocky."

"You think that was cute?"

"Yeah. You looked like a squirrel."

"A squirrel— You idiot!"

A karate chop bounced off the crown of my skull. Oww, that hurt.

"W-What are you doing?!"

"That's what I was about to ask you!"

We each stood up with a clatter. Suddenly, a fan cut through the air between us. It snapped open to reveal the word 'carnage.' There was no mistaking it, this absolutely had to be...

"That's enough of a commotion. You wouldn't want to disturb the other customers, would you?"

"Wh—?! Sarashiki? Why are you dressed like that?"

Surprisingly, she was in a maid's uniform too. Did she borrow that from us or something? It was exactly the same design as my class's.

"It's Tatenashi."

"Huh?"

"I told you, call me Tatenashi."

"Okay, Tatenashi."

"Perfect." She smoothly flipped her fan back toward herself and snapped it shut, as if she were a rakugo comedian or a traditional dance master.

"Anyway, I suppose I'll have some tea as well."

"Wait, you aren't working here?"

"Nope."

"Then why are you dressed—oh, never mind."

Just as I let out what definitely wasn't my first sigh of the day, a girl who looked like she'd be even more trouble than most rushed toward us.

"Hi, I'm from the newspaper club! I'm here to get photos of Orimura in a tux."

It was Mayuzumi Kaoruko, the newspaper club's most active member. She was always taking pictures of me, so I'd come to recognize her.

"Oh, hi, Kaoruko! What's up?"

"Oh! It's Tat! You look great in that uniform. Can I get a shot of you with Orimura?" Her thumb was already drifting toward the shutter release, and Tatenashi was already giving a V-sign and a grin. *Was everyone in the second year this enthusiastic?*

"...I think I'm done here."

"What, Rin? Finished already?"

"I have to go work at my own class's café."

"I see. Oh, right. I might end up there later."

"Mm-hm. Well, we could certainly use the business."

"Sure."

As they spoke, I could see Kaoruko's ideas of the proper composition change as quickly as the fall weather.

"You know, I need to get a girl in the picture too."

"Didn't you already get one with me?"

"Well, yeah, but you're just overpowering, you know? Maybe if we get everyone involved it'll work."

"Oh, that sounds good. I'll go help out while you do that."

"Okay, sounds good. All right, can I get all of the maids?"

*I'm really not sure about this thing where they don't even bother asking me. Anyway, with that, the photo shoot started.*

First was Cecilia.

"Smile, Ichika."

"Like this?"

"You look so awkward. That simply won't do at all."

"I think you're enjoying this enough for the both of us."

"Oh, really?" she giggled.

"C'mon. You don't have to take my arm."

"Well, why not? There's nothing wrong with it."

*I hope I'm just imagining those stabbing glares from the others.*

Second, Laura.

"Well, you know. You're a lot taller than I am, Ichika."

"Huh. Yeah, I guess that's true."

"So you can go ahead and do it."

"Eh? Do what?"

"You can pick me up."

"Uhh..."

"Just for the photo, though, okay? Don't get any funny ideas!"

"Calm down, calm down."

"I am perfectly calm!"

*That's a complete and total lie.*

Third, Charl.

"Hey, uh, Ichika. What do you think of this outfit? I look weird in it, don't I?"

"Nah, you're fine. I think it looks perfect on you."

"Really? You don't think a tux works better?"

"I think the maid's uniform is best. You're adorable in that skirt."

"A-Adorable..."

"Yeah."

"Really? Adorable?" Charl giggled.

*She's smiling even wider now.*

Fourth, Houki.

"....."

"What's wrong, Houki? Let's get this out of the way."

"I really didn't want to have any pictures of me dressed like this."

"Why not? I think it looks perfect on you."

"It does not! It's not like me at all! You're just—"

"Okay, okay, fine. We're busy, so let's just get this over with."

"D-Don't hold my hand!"

"You don't need to be that angry about it."

"Good grief, you're so annoying."

And with that, the maid and butler photoshoot was over. Kaoruko's satisfaction was obvious as she looked at the previews on her camera.

"Whew. You guys came out great. It was fun photographing you, too."

"Kaoruko, can you cover the student council later too?"

"Of course! Leave it to me!" She pounded her chest as she answered.

For a girl in a cultural club, she sure reacted like someone on a sports team a lot.

"Oh, right, Ichika. Since I'm here to help out, why don't you take a break and look around the school?"

"Are you sure?"

"Of course. Special favor, just for you."

"But won't everyone else be mad at me if I disappear?"

"It's fine. I'll cover for you."

Hmm. Tatenashi was pretty popular, so maybe the customers wouldn't mind. I decided to accept the favor.

"Thanks, then."

"Yeah. Have fun."

I took off my tuxedo jacket and walked out of the classroom. The line still snaked up and down the hall, but with Tatenashi around, at least it was clearing faster.

"Oh, there's Orimura!"

"Where are you going? Taking a break?"

"Yeah, pretty much." I made for the front door as I answered.

"Do you have a moment?" came a voice from the stairway landing.

"Yeah?"

"Sorry to bother you. Here, this is me." A woman in a suit quickly handed me her business card.

"Hmm... Makigami Reiko? Public relations manager for the IS equipment developer Mitsurugi?"

She was a beautiful woman with luxuriant hair. A smile had been plastered across her face since she called out to me. She was definitely a businesswoman.

"Yes. And we'd love to see you using some of our equipment."

*Ugh... This again...*

There was no end to the list of companies who wanted to see their gear in action on Byakushiki. I'd actually wasted more than half my summer vacation just dealing with them. Really, what they were after was having their gear used by the only man in the world who could pilot an IS. It'd probably be incredibly effective marketing. Especially because Kuramochi Engineering, the developers of Byakushiki, hadn't produced any equipment, I was buried in proposals from around the world.

But, you know, the thing was. Byakushiki wasn't interested, and I couldn't change that. Equipment needed expansion slots open to install it. But even beyond that, the core had its own 'tastes,' and that was what determined whether it would accept gear. And Byakushiki didn't do ranged weapons. It didn't like shields either. In fact, it wasn't interested in anything but the Yukihiro Nigata. On the other hand, picking up a gun and controlling it manually during my fight with Laura was enough to get it to evolve into Setsura, which can do ranged attacks, melee, and defense... So it was all up in the air, really.

"Well, um, uh... Listen, I think I should talk with the school first, if you don't mind."

"Oh, don't worry about that!" This lady in a suit—Makigami, was her name?—was a lot more aggressive than her looks let on. She reached out and grabbed my arm so I couldn't get away. "How about bolt-on armor, or additional thrusters? If you agree, we'll throw in a hip-mounted blade!"

"Well, um... Are you— Actually, I was just on my way to meet up with someone, so sorry, but maybe some other time!"

"Ah—!"

While she was fishing through her bag for a catalog, I slipped from her grasp and escaped. *Wow, that took longer than I thought.* I hurried to make my appointment.



"Bwa-ha-ha."

At the gates of IS Academy, a young man laughed while clutching a ticket in his hand. It was Ichika's friend, Gotanda Dan.

"Finally, finally, finally! IS Academy! Babes everywhere! I finally made it!"

Let's rewind three days. Dan was practicing the bass at their friend Mitarai Kazuma's house.

"So, Ichika got himself a lady yet?"

"My man keeps mumbling in his sleep that he doesn't like girls."

"Seriously, he's still on that shit?"

While Dan tightened the strings on his bass, Kazuma was fiddling with the knobs on his amp. The two weren't a band, just members of the "Wish I Could Play" club. Total membership: 2.

"Oh, hey, school festivals are coming up. What're you gonna do, Dan?"

"Me? Oh, probably the rugby club's pie toss."

"That's some weird shit."

"What about you? Doing a band or something?"

"Dude, you think I'm good enough to play in public?"

"Yeah, I hear ya. We've been at this a year now and we haven't gotten anywhere."

"No, man, really. We just suck." They started laughing at the futility of it. "Really, though. Everyone's always talking about how hot the girls at IS Academy are. Wish I could go there."



"Totally. And Ichika isn't even interested. What a dumbass."

"Yeah, what a dumbass."

The two cracked up laughing, then fell silent as they each began to imagine the dates they could be on.

***Ring-ring. Ring-ring.***

"Huh? Oh, my phone. Oh, hey! Ichika!" Dan pulled out his ringing phone and held it up to his ear.

"Yo, Dan?"

"How you doin', Ichika? What's going on?"

"Hey, remember when you said you wanted to come to IS Academy?"

"Do I ever. What, you find some kinda way to get me in?"

"Well, actually..."

Dan froze for two seconds, then nearly leapt up from his seat and shouted, "Bro, are you serious right now?!"

"One hundred percent. I got a ticket, and I was thinking maybe you might wanna use it."

"You bet your ass I want that shit."

Dan didn't hesitate for a moment. There was absolutely no question in his mind.

"Knew it. All right, I'mma mail it over. Don't forget it, or they won't let you in."

"Sure! Got it!" Dan's enthusiasm crept into his voice. "Dude, Ichika. You're a true bro. I love you, man."

"Keep it in your pants."

"Anyway, yeah! Thanks!"

"I know, I know. See you there!" Dan hung up the phone, looked up at the ceiling, and yelled, "ALL RIIIIIIIGHT!"

And that's how Dan came to be at IS Academy.

It was already ten minutes after he was supposed to meet up with Ichika, but he barely noticed. *Just look at all the absolute babes standing around.* Dan was in his best outfit, but even without it, he would have been attracting a lot of attention as the only boy around.

"I wonder if that guy is someone's boyfriend?"

"Probably. He looks good."

"Really? Orimura's more my type."

Dan's heart began to beat faster as he overheard the girls around him. *Everyone's looking at me... Am I going to find someone?*

"You there."

"Yeah?"

Dan stood ramrod-straight as someone called out to him. He turned to see a serious-looking girl in glasses, holding a file folder: Nohotoke Utsuho.

"Are you one of the guests today? Would you mind showing me your ticket?"

"Oh, sure." Dan handed her the ticket, already a bit crumpled from his fidgeting.

"You were invited by... Oh. Orimura."

"Uh, do you know him?"

"*Everyone* here knows him. Anyway, here you go."

*Wow, she's hot... But cute, too! I should try to get to know her. But what should I talk about?*

"So, uhh."

"Mm? What is it?"

"Great weather today, isn't it."

"I suppose."

End of conversation. Utsuho walked away, a confused look on her face as she watched Dan shrink back into self-recrimination. *Ugh, I'm fuckin' terrible at this...* If Dan had had his bass in his hand, maybe he would have started playing a lament. Instead, he waited for Ichika with all the trepidation of waiting for the hangman.



"Oh, hey, there you are. Hey, Dan!"

"Hey..."

*Whoa, what in the world happened to him? He looks like he's mourning the loss of a loved one or something.*

"What's wrong, man?"

"Nothing... I'm just too damn awkward..."

"Well, yeah, but why's it bugging you now?"

"Oh don't even fucking start!"

"Dude, chill, or you're gonna get kicked out."

"Ugh... Okay, okay."

Dan, getting back to himself after whatever happened, fell in behind me.

"Let's go see Rin. I bet she'll be surprised to see you."

"Rin, huh? She still such a live wire?"

"You wouldn't believe it."

"By the way, Ichika."

"Huh?"

"What's up with your outfit?"

"Uh, her class has dim sum."

"Don't change the subject."

"What does it matter what I'm dressed like?"

"Okay, okay, fine." Dan chuckled as I led him into the school.

"Want to head straight to Rin's class?"

"Mm? Nah, we can take the long way. It'll give me a chance to look around."

"Okay. Honestly, I never really got the chance to either."

We started walking side-by-side.

"Oh, there's Orimura! Hey!"

"I'm definitely gonna drop by your class later."

"All right! Got a candid shot of Ichika in his tux!" Everywhere we went, girls called out to me, and I was busy waving or saying something back. All through it, Dan and I kept up a quiet conversation.

"You sure are popular."

"Nah, they just don't ever see guys so I'm something new and exciting."

"Really? I'm still jealous. Hey, why don't we trade places?"

"I'm down with it if you are. But how are you gonna handle the IS training?"

"Hahaha! If I can be around this many girls, I'll go through the fire and the flames!"

"Less fire, more *gunfire*."

"...You're right, gotta keep myself safe for the next generation."

"Dude, you sound like a public service ad."

"Well, I don't want to die!"

"And you think I do?"

"I guess not. But it doesn't always turn out how you want."

We each sighed a little for some reason, and ended up just heading to the closest classroom, where the art club was set up.

"Art is an explosion!"

*I... have a bad feeling about this.*

"So as the art club, we have a bomb-disarming game!"

"Oh! There's Orimura!"

"And he has another guy with him!"

"All right! Start disarming the bomb!" A girl wearing the armband of a club president was trying to force us into playing the game. *Uh, art club. Are you sure about your president?*

"Um... How did it go? Sensor wire first, I think?" I examined the wiring, then slipped in a pair of nippers. With a quick snip, I clipped the wire to the shock sensor. "There. Good, it's not the kind that needs a jumper. Next is..."

"Ichika..."

"What?"

"They teach you that shit here?"

"Yeah."

I thought back to my first lesson in disarming bombs, and how helpful Laura was during it. I couldn't have asked for a better teacher than the leader of a special forces squad. It seemed like dealing with dangerous devices was a day-to-day job for her.

"...You know, on second thought, I think I'm fine in a normal high school."

"Huh? Really?"

"Yeah..."

I didn't really get what was going on in his head, but it seemed like Dan had given up on IS Academy. Not like it was his choice to make as long as he couldn't operate one.

"Ooh! You're already to the last part, Orimura!"

The last part... Namely, completely disabling the explosive. The part in the movies that always comes down to cutting the red wire or the blue wire. This game was the same way. Two cords, one red and one blue; cut the right one and it was over, but cut the wrong one and it was all over.

"Which one, Dan?"

"Why're you asking me?"

"C'mon, it's just a game. Pick one."

"Um, uhh... Red or blue... Red or blue..."

Hmm. The blue wire reminded me of Cecilia's Blue Tears. The red... Houki's Akatsubaki.

"Dan."

"Huh?"

"Which do you prefer, blondes or brunettes?"

"Blondes, easy!"

"All right." I clipped the blue wire. Immediately, an alarm screamed.

"Whoops. Wrong one."

"Dude! Why'd you cut the blue one? I hadn't even decided!"

"You said you liked blondes, right?"

"How does that mean I picked blue?"

"Because of Blue Tears."

"What the hell are you even talking about?"

As I tried to calm down Dan, I got a lollipop as a consolation prize. *A lollipop? In high school? Uh, art club. Really?*

"Phew, that worked up a sweat. Let's go get something to drink, Ichika."

"Huh? Oh, sure. Why don't we go see Rin?"

"Her class is doing dim sum, right? Sounds great."

There wasn't much left to decide after that. We climbed the stairs and headed to Class 1-B.

"Welcome~!"

"Bwah! Rin, what are you doing?!"

"What's Dan doing here?!"

"That qipao just looks wrong on you. And why on earth— GAH!" Dan was forcefully silenced, by a flung plate.

*Wow... He took it right on the nose...*

"Get out of here!"

"What the hell! That hurt! Why can't you be like the cutie I just met?"

"Like who, now?"

"Hahaha. Like I'm gonna tell you."

"Ichika, your pet moron is broken."

"Don't call me a moron."

"I mean, she's right."

"Don't agree with her!"

Eventually, the rest of Class B got sick of our triumvirate of old friends squabbling. We took our seats and opened our menus.

"So?"

"So, what?"

"So how's it going with Rin? C'mon, tell me!"

"Dude, what are you talking about? And what did you mean about the 'cutie you just met'?"

"Man, that lady was adorable."

"Lady? Not girl?"

"Well, I think she was older than us."

"Oh really."

"Don't you know her?"

"Who?"

Sometimes I really didn't understand him.

"Here's your WATER!"

"Whoa! What's gotten into you, Rin? You don't need to slam it down."

"Yeah."

"Shut up, Dan, or I'm gonna slam *you* down."

"Chill... Didn't you see that TV show? You're a cadet. It'd kill me."

"It sure would. So you'd better watch your mouth."

"Hahahaha. Good one."

"I wasn't joking. Jeez."

We continued to chat until my phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Where are you, Ichika? All of the customers keep complaining that you're gone. Can you hurry up and get back here?"

Charl's frustration was beginning to show in her voice. If that was where *she* was at, I really had no choice.

"Sorry, I'll be right there. I'm in the next room over, so it should be quick."

"Okay. Thanks." After I hung up, I told Dan and Rin that I'd be leaving.

"Get back to work, butler."

"Yeah, you heard her."

"Don't need that from you, Dan."

Somehow, this really reminded me of my middle school days. We spent so much time together then... Ah well, that was enough nostalgia. I returned to Class A's room.

"Oh, there you are, Ichika. Good timing. They're waiting for a game at Table 3. And can you drop this order off at Table 4 on the way?" Charl passed me a tray as I walked into the room.

"Sure. Where'd Tatenashi go?"

"She said she had student council stuff and left."

*How irresponsible...*

"Anyway! It's a mess here, so get to work!"

"Roger!"

I rushed from table to table.

"My apologies for the wait, madam."

"Squee! It's Orimura!"

"Let's play a game!"

"I ordered the reward set! Sit down!"

I glanced around the room and saw that the others were popular too. Especially Laura, who was usually so unapproachable but in her maid's uniform was getting called around the room to play games. *This is pretty hard work, honestly...* I'd gotten overheated as I worked, and began to roll my sleeves up.

"Ichika! No modifying your uniform."

Houki snapped at me as she carried a tray. She was tied with Charl for second-most-popular, probably because of just how unusual the idea of her dressing as a maid was.

"Houki? Why can't I?"

"You just can't. You don't wear something like that very often, so wear it right when you do."

"What? Do you like seeing me in it?"

"What are you talking about?! I-I just want you to do your job properly!"

"I was joking."

"What?!"

"Problem?"

"Hmph! Whatever!" Houki fluffed her skirt and stalked back toward the kitchen. I wondered what set her off.

*All right! Just gotta keep at it!* An hour of hard work later, I was finally done being pinballed around.







"Good job today, Orimura."

"You too, Takatsuki."

Takatsuki Shizune, one of the harder-working students in the class, had put in a lot of effort today.

"Why not take a break? We need to do a bunch of prep before reopening, anyway."

"You sure?"

"An hour or so should be fine. C'mon, here's your chance to check out the school festival with a girl."

Just as I was about to take her up on her offer, I felt a yank on my arm. W-What was going on?

"So true! Let's go, Ichika!" Cecilia had spun me around.

Charl, watching us, yelled for the first time in what felt like forever, "Agh! No fair, Cecilia! Ichika, bring me along too!"

"W-Wait! I'll come too, then!" Houki shoved her way in, with a terrifying look in her eyes.

"Let's go, Ichika." Laura was already ready to leave.

*Umm... It's gonna be a mess dragging this many people around... Wait, I know!* A lightbulb went off over my head and I said, "We've got around ten minutes free time for each of you, so why not split it up that way?"

"So we'd each..."

"Get alone time..."

"With Ichika?"

"...Not bad."

Cecilia, Charl, Houki, and Laura were each nodding. I couldn't hear exactly what they were whispering to each other, but it seemed like they were down with it.

"So, who goes first?"

"Let's do rock-paper-scissors!"

They began to play to choose their order. That was quick!

"Three!"

Three had paper. The remaining one had scissors. Charl giggled. Her smile at getting to go first matched the first scissors, now V-sign, of her fingers.



"The cooking club?"

"Yeah. I heard they're making traditional Japanese cuisine, and I've been wanting to learn how."

"Makes sense. You're a good cook."

I'd gotten to try plenty of her lunches, and she always did a great job at bringing out the flavor of the food rather than overpowering it—which was how I liked my meals. *I hope she learns it so I get to try her take on Japanese cooking.*

"Mm. I'll have to make it for you sometime."

"Really? Thanks." As we spoke, we made our way to the room the cooking club was using. "Wow, they really went all-out."

They had snacks and side dishes on sale. Mountains of them. A row of plates had everything from beef stew to oden, salads, stews, and barbecue all lined up. All of them looked so good that I felt myself begin to drool.

"So this is Japanese beef stew?"

"Yeah. Making it used to be a vital skill for a housewife."

"Huh. Why was that?"

"Boys used to get taught to pick a wife who made good stew. I'm not quite sure why."

"A-A wife?! Hmm... I guess..."

Charl must have been surprised by my explanation, as she spent a few seconds staring at the stew. I was distracted from thinking that she must have wanted to try it by the arrival of the cooking club's president.

"Oh, Orimura! And Dunois! I heard all about when you used to present as a guy."

"Oh, hi."

"Hi."

"So, what are you two doing? On a date? Have the butler and maid snuck away for a private rendezvous? Don't worry, I'm not jealous. I've got no beef with you— Get it? Beef? Like the stew?"

*Ooh! I think I like this person.* I was just about to make the same kind of joke, but she beat me to it, and that didn't just open up the conversation, it put us a triple-jump closer together.

"You were about to say something silly, weren't you, Ichika."

How could she tell?

"Anyway, dig in! It's free this time. As long as you let me get a picture. And maybe vote for us?"

Already playing dirty, I see.

"No, that's fine, we'll pay." That's Charl for you. Always doing the right thing.

"Anyway, um. The beef stew, right?"

"Yes, please."

The club president ladled a bowlful from a chafing dish and handed to Charl. I ordered the same thing, and we began to eat.

"Ooh. This is..."

"This is great, Ichika."

"Yeah, it's great."

It was flavorful, without being too heavy. The kind of thing people meant when they said 'braised perfectly.' I wished I had some rice to go with it.

"It really is good."

"For this, we used a pressure cooker. It doesn't just speed up the cook time, it also improves the flavor."

Charl listened intently to the club president as we enjoyed our meal. She asked, "A pressure cooker, huh. Any other tricks I should know?"

The club president laughed, "That's the chef's secret. If you want to know more, you should join our club."

"The cooking club, huh... Ichika, you like it when I cook good things, right?"

"Huh? Of course I do. It's important to enjoy your meals." Dining is almost its own flavor of salvation. It's something I thought I'd read somewhere.

"Oh, I see. Yeah. Yeah, that makes sense. Ehehehe."

For some reason, Charl was grinning as she stuffed the last of her stew into her cheeks. *This really is good. I think I'll finish mine, too.*

And with that, my break with Charl was over.

◇

"You're late!" An eyepatched maid—Laura—was already waiting for me in the hall with her arms crossed. "You're never punctual, are you."

"Come on. Do you want to use up all your time just complaining?"

"Well... That wouldn't be good..."

"Hey, you wanted to see the tea ceremony club, right? Let's get going."

"D-Don't hold my hand!" Laura's face seemed a little bit red as she brushed my hand away.

"Huh? Oh, sorry."

"Well, um... Actually... If you want to, I guess you can?"

"Huh? C'mon, let's go."

"....."

**Smack.** A karate chop caught me under the ribs. *Why...*

"Hello. Come in— Oh! It's Orimura! Can I take a picture?"

Why did people want to take pictures everywhere I went? I didn't get it. Maybe photography was more fun than I thought.

"We're doing trial classes in matcha. Here, this will be your tea room."

"Ooh, tatami mats. You really went all the way with it."

Much like the cooking club, the tea ceremony club had done amazing work with their room. I guess after how much effort people from all over the world put in just to be admitted to IS Academy, it made sense.

"Please, sit down."

Laura and I both took off our shoes and kneeled on the tatami.

"A butler and a maid in a tea room is certainly quite the sight."

"Hmph. What are you, so worried about clothing? A girl?"

"What, like you weren't about to melt into the floor when Chifuyu laughed at how you looked in it?"

"Shut up! She's a different story!"

I savored the memory of Chifuyu, who'd come to check up on the class, cracking up laughing when she saw Laura. At that moment, the hardened soldier looked more like a young conscript sent out to the front lines with a water pistol. But if I said that, she'd be mad, so I stayed quiet.

"Don't worry about the formalities. Just enjoy."

"Ah, thanks."

The club president, wearing a kimono, smiled at Laura and I as she handed us teacakes. I took mine, took a bite, and savored the sweet white bean paste spreading across my tongue.

"These are good."

"Mm..."

Laura stared, perplexed, at her teacake rather than eating it.

"Is something wrong?"

"H-How am I supposed to eat this?"

The face drawn on the teacake rabbit was adorable. Laura stared at it, squinting, and I wondered whether it was saying to her 'Eat me!' or 'Let me go!' Judging by her expression, she was leaning toward the former.

"Laura."

"W-What?!"

"If you don't eat it, you can't have your tea."

"Ugh..."

Prodded along, she came to a decision and swallowed the rabbit in a single bite. She probably didn't want to see a half-rabbit with toothmarks.

"Mmm. Japanese sweets are delicious."

*Weren't you just conflicted a moment ago?* A look of satisfaction spread over her face as she savored the teacake.

"Here you are."

Mugs of matcha were then placed in front of us.

*"Otemae itadakimasu. Thank you."*

After bowing, we picked up our mugs, swirled them twice, and raised them to our lips. The unique bitterness of matcha filled our mouths, blending perfectly with the sweet aftertaste of the teacakes. The tea left a clean, refreshed feeling in my throat, and both Laura and I let out sighs of satisfaction after drinking.

*"Kekkou na otemae de. That was exquisite."*

Repeating the standard words of the ceremony, we bowed again. Normally, we would have spent some time contemplating the empty mugs, but the point of this was less the full ceremony and more just enjoying the tea.

"You're welcome back anytime." With that, the club president saw us out of the room.

"That was really good."

"Mm. Yes, it was. Japanese culture is fascinating."

"If you're so fascinated by it, why don't you try Japanese clothing?"

"Japanese clothing, huh. That's right, I don't think I've done that."

I imagined Laura in Japanese clothing. Her flowing silver hair tied up in the traditional manner as she was wrapped in a kimono... Seemed like it would look good on her.

"Would you like to see it?"

"I guess. At least once, to see how it looks on you."

"Oh!" A rare smile glittered from Laura's face. When she realized what she looked like, she suddenly spun away from me.

"Well, at least if you ever get the chance."

"Sure."

That concluded my break with Laura.

◇

"Hey, Cecilia, you play the violin, right?"

"Yes. The piano somewhat, as well."

"I'm amazed. I wish I could do that, but I couldn't even learn kendo."

"Then—"

Cecilia tugged my arm. She was pointing to a classroom with a sign reading 'Brass Band - Try an Instrument' over its door.

"Why not give it a try? Why, I could even help you in your lessons!"

"Do you think we have time? I don't know how to read music."

"Music comes from the heart, not from a sheet of paper!"

That was a good line.

"Shall we go, then?"

"Hey, hey, you don't have to pull me that hard!"

As we opened the door, we saw the leader, apparently having given up for the day, maintaining an instrument in the center of the room. She worked a valve up and down repeatedly, as if trying to ensure it was fully greased.

"Um..."

It felt bad to distract her. As I thought that, though, the brass band leader noticed we were there and her face peeked up, "Ooh! Ooh! Our sixth visitor today! Right this way! Wait, is that you, Orimura? Can I take a picture?"

"Go right ahead."

"All right!"

Her phone sounded out merrily as she snapped the shutter, and she stared at the screen grinning for a few moments before Cecilia cleared her throat, "So! Which instruments may we try?"

"Hmm. Anything we've got! I'd recommend the French horn. I love the shape of it, how it coils back in on itself."

"C-Coils?"

"Anyway, Ichika, go right ahead!"

She fitted a mouthpiece to the horn she'd been tuning, and handed it to me. Taking it, I was surprised at just how heavy it felt in my arms.

"How do you hold this?"

"Place your right hand here, with your thumb wrapped around. And stuff your left hand into here."

"Like this?" That seemed like a really awkward way to hold it, but apparently it was what you were supposed to do.

"Now blow into it."

At her prompting, I blew as hard as I could, "*Pfft! Pfft!*"

It made no noise...

"Hmm, try pressing your mouth against the mouthpiece, like this." The leader pressed on her lips to demonstrate.

"Like this?"

"Yeah. Now blow from a fixed point at the middle of your lips."

"I'll try."

**Toot!**

"Hey, that worked!"

"Not bad. Would you like to join our club?"

"I'm kinda busy lately... What about you, Cecilia?"

"Me?!"

"I mean, you play, right?"

"I've only played string instruments. Never a wind instrument."

"Really? I'd have thought you'd played the flute. It's perfect for a refined young heiress."

"A refined young heiress..." For some reason, Cecilia repeated it back to herself.

"Why not give it a try?" I said as I handed her the horn.

"Er, well, ah, this is..."

"Huh?"

"An indirect kiss..."

"Huh? I didn't hear you."

"No— Nothing! It was nothing at all!"

Cecilia waved her hands in frustration as she looked at the horn. Her stare was icily serious, and I involuntarily gulped.

"Very well. Here I go."

"Oh, wait, let me change the mouthpiece. Here, all set."

"Ah..."

"Huh?"

"....."

For some reason, Cecilia was glaring at the band leader in rage. Why? Wasn't that something you should be grateful for?

"Ready?"

"Actually, I've changed my mind." Cecilia pressed the horn back into the leader's hands. "Some people just have no sense!"

Cecilia was angry for some reason.

My third one-on-one break finished.



"I'm last... What a failure..."

"Why are you mumbling to yourself? Let's go somewhere."

"Yes. You're right. What shall we—"

"What's the kendo club doing? How about we go check them out?"

"Wh-What?!"

"Hmm... Oh, okay, over there."

"W-Wait! I don't want to—"

"C'mon, hurry up."

"D-Don't grab my hand! I can walk by myself!"

Trailing Houki, who was displeased for some reason, along, I headed for the room where the kendo club was doing a show.

"Welcome!"

The windows were covered in blackout curtains. Inside waited a person concealed in a suit of practice armor.

"Whoa!"

"Well, well. If it isn't Orimura, along with our ghost member Shinonono."

"Captain? What on earth are you—"

"Well, at first we wanted to let people try out kendo, right? But that wouldn't get many votes, I thought? So we went with fortunetelling?"

*Why was everything she said in the form of a question?*

"But, uh. You know? No one's showing up? So to really get into the part, I put on my practice armor?" She definitely had the wrong idea about something. "Anyway, let me tell your fortunes. Sit down! Sit down!"

Houki and I went along with her recommendation and intently watched her. She had a deck of hanafuda cards in her hand...

"Um..."

"Yes? What is it?"

"Why are you using hanafuda cards? Don't people normally use tarot cards or something?"

"I'm an expert at hanafuda fortune-telling, though?"

"Er, captain? I've never even heard of that before..."

"Yeah. I mean, I just made it up?"

*What the hell.*

"Anyway. Shall we get started? Maybe I can tell your love fortunes?"

*Why are you even asking if we don't get to pick?* I wanted to fire back, but she was already dealing out her cards.

"Hmm... *Ame-shikou*. Orimura, you're probably having trouble with women?"

"What's 'probably' supposed to mean..."

I couldn't really argue with her, though.

"Even today, right? I really have a lot of sympathy for you, you know?"

"Sigh..."

"All right, our ghost member Shinonono's love fortune next?"

"If you don't mind."

Was the captain lowkey mad at Houki about her poor attendance, or just lowkey because she wasn't mad? Her expressions were hidden by her mask.

"Hmmm... Shinonono, yours is *Tsukimizake*, are you looking forward to something? It just might happen? And I think your lucky spot is the kendo dojo?"

"Well, um... I'll show up more this semester..."

"Really? That would be wonderful."

It seemed like that was all for Houki's fortune, too.

"Oh, right. Shall I test your compatibility?"

"Our compatibility?"

"Really? That sounds great!" Houki suddenly thrust herself toward the club captain in excitement. The captain began to explain as she tried to calm Houki down.

"Well, first, could you hold hands? And face each other? Yeah, like that." Houki and I clasped our right hands and brought our faces close. "Now, stay like that for ten seconds?"

"Uhh..."

"How is this supposed to tell you anything?" Houki asked the captain a bit anxiously.

"Well?"

"Well, what?"

"Well, you know? You wouldn't hold hands with someone you didn't like for ten seconds? So you must at least not not like each other? That's all."

*That was pretty damn lazy!*

"I— I see..."

Hm? Houki seemed pretty happy about it, at least. What there was to be happy about, I wasn't sure.

"Anyway, our break's about over. Let's head back to the classroom."

"Yeah, I guess."

"Hey, Houki..."

"W-What?"

"You can let go of my hand now."

"Oh, right!"

Houki quickly pulled her hand away from mine, as if she just now realized they were still entwined.

"Anyway, thank you."

"Of course. Thanks for coming? Oh, Orimura, can I take a picture?"

"Go right ahead."

"Thanks."

The shutter snapped. I was getting used to this.

"All right, let's head back."

"We're... compatible. We're compatible..."

"Heeeeeeey, Houki?"

"W-W-What?!"

"C'mon, let's head back."

"Oh! Right!"

We walked back to the classroom, with Houki for some reason swinging her right arm at the same time as her right leg. Class 1-A was still packed, and as soon as I got back I was pulled back to work. *Well, everyone else is working so hard, I don't mind having to too.* Just working hard together was its own reward. *All right, I've got to really put my all into it!*

"Ta-dah! Tatenashi is here!"

"....."



A Slacker draws near  
!

Command? [RUN] [RUN] [RUN]

Ichika started to run away.

But was blocked in front.

“Gah! Could you stop getting in my way?!”

“Aww, you don’t have to put it like that. Anyway, though, Ichika. Since I helped your class, could you appear in the student council’s production.”

“That didn’t sound like a question.”

“Of course. Because it wasn’t one.”

“What about my opinion on the matter?”

“It’s perfectly fine for me to decide. I’m the student council president, after all.”

Don’t just quote Mi\*\*\*o Aida at me!

“...So, what did you want me to do?”

“Aren’t you going to put up more of a fight?”

“I already know it won’t do me any good.”

“Oh, so you think you know what I want? You’ve still got a lot to learn, boy.” Tatenashi poked my nose. “Ahahah. You’re so much fun to tease, Ichika.”

*Ugh, what am I even supposed to do?*

“Anyway, a production?!”

“Aww. You don’t have to get angry about it. It’s just a play.”

“A play?”

That sounded more... Normal than I had expected.

“A play with audience participation.”

“.....?!”

*Audience participation? Just what did she have planned?*

“Anyway, come along. I’ll fill you in, now that it’s decided.” She theatrically pointed her fan at me.

“Um, Tatenashi? We can’t really spare Ichika right now...”

*Thanks, Charl! I needed someone to cover for me!*

“You should come along too, Charlotte.”

“Wha—”

“I’ll let you wear a pretty dress.”

“A dress...”

*Don’t give up, Charl! I know that kind of thing is something girls want, but I need your backup here!*

“Then, um... Okay, just for a little bit.”

Charl gave in. *This is a mess.*

"Mmm. You're cute when you go along with things! All right, Houki, Cecilia, Laura, let's go."

"**What?!**" The trio had been listening in and raised their voices in surprise.

"I've got dresses for all of you."

"Then..."

"I suppose."

"Hmm. If we must..."

Houki, Cecilia, and Laura gave in too.

"So, what play is it, anyway?"

Tatenashi giggled as she snapped her fan open. On it was written 'focused assault.'

*"It's Cinderella."*



"Are you dressed, Ichika?"

"....."

"I'm coming in."

"Say that before you open the door!"

"Wow, you're not even dressed yet. I'm disappointed."

"...Why?"

I was in the fourth arena's locker room. The place where I normally changed into my IS suit. I was dressed in... Well, I *guess* it was a prince's outfit...

"Here's your crown."

"Yay..."

"Well, you don't sound very enthused about this. Would you prefer to be Cinderella instead?"

"Definitely not!"

Really, if I had to put it into words... She was just incredibly frustrating to deal with.

"Anyway, it's almost time!"

I'd snuck a peek at the inside of the arena earlier, and it was filled with an absolutely gorgeous set. The seats were already packed, and occasionally their cheers drifted back to the locker room.

"You know I haven't even gotten a chance to look at a script or anything, right?"

"That's fine. I'll be announcing everything, all you have to do is follow along and keep things moving. So just ad-lib the rest, okay?"

It... didn't really seem fine to me. Still filled with doubt, I walked to the wings.

"All right, raise the curtains!"

A buzzer sounded, and the lights dimmed. The curtains concealing the set rose, and a spotlight shone on the stage.

"Long, long ago, there lived a girl called Cinderella."

Well, that was a good sign. It seemed like it'd be a normal play after all. But who was playing Cinderella? As I wondered to myself, I made my way to the part of the set made up like a ball.

"No, not named—known as. Wandering from ball to ball as they took on whole armies, these maidens gladly embraced their ash-shrouded fate to become the strongest warriors of all! Their title: Princesses of Cinders, Cinderellas!"

*Huh?*

"Tonight, their thirst for blood rises in their throats again. Targeting secret military plans hidden inside the crown of a prince of a neighboring country, the maidens dance forth onto a ballroom battlefield!"

"Wait, what?!"

"I've got you now!" Rin sprung onto the scene with a roar, clad in a beautiful white Cinderella dress with silver embroidery.

"Eh?!"

"Hand it over!"

She shot an icy glare in response to my reflexive dodge, before following up with a hail of Chinese throwing knives almost like shuriken. *Has she gone completely off the deep end?!*

"That could have killed me!"

"Don't worry, I'll just kill you *almost* to death!"

"What's that even supposed to mean?!"

I wasn't going to die there. Flipping over the tea set on the table, I blocked the knives with the tray.

"Hi-yah!" Rin kicked the knife-studded tray from my hands.

*You idiot! I can see right up your dress!* Never mind... she had bike shorts on underneath. I wasn't sure if that was a relief or not. *Wait, she's just going to axe kick me now!*

"Wait, wait! Are you wearing glass slippers?!"

"Don't worry. They're toughened glass."

As I sparred with Rin, I noticed a red line of light darting across the stage. *Huh, what's that? Looks like it's getting clos—* An instant later, the scenery next to my face exploded.

"Whoa!"

*A sniper rifle? Cecilia?!* It must have been equipped with a silencer, as I couldn't hear the report or make out a muzzle flash. And it must have been a repeater, as more shots whizzed by my head.

"I'm gonna die! This is actually going to kill me!"

I ducked low and sprinted for cover. What the hell was this play?!



*Oh, drat, he got away.* As spent brass jangled around her feet, Cecilia pulled her eye away from the scope. The basics of sniping were to shoot and move, and she was already on her way to her next vantage point. *But this time I simply must win!*

There was a secret competition only the girls on stage had been told about. Whoever took the crown from Ichika's head would also take the right to move into his room. They were all shocked when it was first mentioned, but Tatenashi's explanation that 'the student council president can do that' was enough to have them all gunning for the prize.

*Living with Ichika... Living with Ichika...* Cecilia had already half-forgotten that it wasn't yet in her grasp, as a smile spread across her face. *Thankfully, it's close enough to make it to the stage in time, and I'm allowed to use anything but IS equipment.* A single precise shot to the crown itself, a dash to the stage, and victory would be hers.

*Yes! Fortune favors those who strike at the critical moment!* Smoothing her dress as she arrived at her second position, Cecilia quickly raised her rifle. *I've got him!*

***Pssh! Pssh!*** Silenced shots rang out again.



*Am I finally safe here?* Cecilia's shots answered an emphatic no, chasing me from my hiding place in the shadows of the set. I'd been spending so long hidden that the crowd was erupting into applause every time the leading man—that is, myself—revealed himself on stage.

"Ahahahah... Thank you, thank you!" Cecilia seized on the chance to open fire yet again as I bowed to the crowd, and I sprang off running across the impossibly-wide stage. "Ugh, I'm trapped?!"

Her shots earlier seemed to have been to drive me into the open.

"Ichika! Get down!"

".....?!"

Charlotte suddenly appeared in front of me, holding a riot shield. Just like the others, she was wearing a Cinderella dress. Somehow, though, it looked stunning on a blonde like her. Was it just a cultural thing?

"Y-You saved me, Charl..."

Bullets pinged off her shield.

"Don't worry about it. Just get out of here!"

"Sure! Thanks again!"

"Actually, wait, there is one thing!"

"What?"

"It'd be really nice if you left me that crown, if you don't mind..."

"Oh? Sure, fine."

If nothing else, it would get everyone else off my back. I put my hand to the crown, only to be interrupted by Tatenashi's voice over the loudspeaker, "To the prince, his country was everything. The mere thought of losing the crown, and the state secrets concealed within, sent a shock through his body."

"What?" My mind stopped in confusion, but my hand was still moving without any real thought. As I grasped the crown— "GWAAAAH!"

A crackling sound filled my ears as electricity surged through me. It was more than just painful, it burnt.

"Wh-Wh-Wh..." Smoke rose from scorched holes in my clothes. "What the hell is this?!"

"Ah! Such a pitiful scene. Is the prince's love for his land truly so great? Sadly, all we can do is watch on. Such a pitiful scene, indeed!"

"You didn't have to say it twice!"

I wasn't sure I could take another shock like that, so I quickly pushed the crown back into place. This... was pretty bad, though. Tatenashi was enjoying it way too much. How was I gonna get out of this mess?

"Sorry, Charl. You saw what just happened."

"Really? But it's important!"

"I know, but... Sorry."

"Ah, wait! Ichika, you—"

I fled like a hare, only to encounter two more Cinderellas, one with black hair and one silver.

"Ichika! Stop right there!"

"I'll be taking that crown now."

Houki brandished a katana, while Laura was dual-wielding tactical knives. *Whoa!*

"That's dangerous!" I dove back from twin slashes and tumbled along the ground.

"Get out of my way, Laura!" yelled Houki.

"I could say the same. Maybe I should eliminate you first."

"Sounds fun. Bring it!"

For some reason, they started to battle each other. *Okay, that just leaves Rin, Cecilia, and Charl... Wait a minute. What is that?* I felt the ground rumble beneath my feet.

"And now! It's your chance to take part! Everyone, set your eyes on the crown!"

"Wha—"

The rumble was from an army of Cinderellas. One which was growing larger and larger as I watched. It felt like something I'd seen in a movie...

"Give it up easy, Orimura!"

"My own prince to live happily ever after with..."

"Give him to me!"

I climbed higher and higher up the set as I fled from the army of Cinderellas.

"Found you, Ichika!"

Guh! It was Houki!

"Give me that crown! If you do... If you do..."

"W-What?"

"Ugh! Just give it to me! Or I'll cut you!"

*That's terrifying! Someone save me!*

"Over here."

"Huh?"

A hand caught my foot, and I fell from the heights of the set.



"We've made it out."

"Phew... Thanks."

I'd been led through the paths below the set to a locker room. It was the one I'd used before, so my uniform and things were all ready for me.

"Um..."

I'd had enough time to catch my breath and realized that it had been too dark to see who I was following. Taking a closer look at her, I saw it was Makigami Reiko, the woman who'd given me her business card earlier. She was grinning—it was the only expression I'd seen her have, really.

"Huh? Why are you—"

"Oh, yes. And now I'll be taking Byakushiki."

"...Huh?"

Her grin remained fixed in place and she replied, "Just hurry up and hand it over, punk."

"Um... Is this a joke?"

"Ugh, do you seriously think I want to make small talk with a little shit like you." Her expression was completely out of sync with the words coming out of her mouth. While I was still processing the gap between the two, she struck me with a fierce kick to the gut. The impact slammed me back into a locker. "Son of a bitch. Looks like my face got stuck this way."

"Wh-Who are you?!" I muttered, as coughs wracked my chest.

"What? Me? I'm a mysterious beauty disguised as an industry insider. Are you happy now?"

She kicked me a couple more times for good measure as I lay on the ground. It was only then that I realized she was a serious threat. I'd gotten far too soft.

"Ugh... Byakushiki!"

This was an emergency, and I materialized my IS suit along with it. My costume dissolved into particles, only to reform. It may have taken more energy than usual, but this was no time to be sweating the small stuff. There was an enemy right in front of me who I knew nothing about.

"I've been waiting for you to do that." Makigami—no, the woman's smile finally disappeared, as her eyes twisted into snakelike slits. As she spoke, her long tongue flitted forth, making her appear even more serpentine.

"Because now, it's time for this!"

".....?!"

Her suit split open, and sharp claws extended from her back. They were striped a menacing black and yellow, jointed like spider legs, and each was tipped with a blade.

"Eat this!" The blades at the tip of her eight armored legs split open, revealing the muzzles of eight guns.

"Shit!" I slammed my leg-mounted thrusters into the floor and fired them at full output. The PIC's inertial canceling carried Byakushiki and I toward the ceiling in an evasive maneuver.

“Oh? Not bad!”

I dropped thrust as I was about to hit the ceiling, and activated Setsura in claw mode. Using Setsura, a built-in weapon, was quicker than materializing Yukihiro Nigata would have been.

“Who *are* you?!”

“Hmm? Haven’t you realized yet? I’m from a shadowy organization!” She replied while dodging backwards.

“Quit fucking with me!”

“You think I’m kidding, you little turd? I’m Autumn, from the secret society Phantom Task! Does that ring a bell?!”

The woman—Autumn—had fully deployed her IS, and was nimbly dodging my attacks with slight PIC movements while at the same time firing bullets from the guns at the tips of her mechanical legs.

“Eat this!”

All eight guns began to converge on me. As the lines of fire closed in from my sides, I leapt into the air. Planting my feet on the ceiling, I fired my thrusters, tumbling forward to close the gap. At the same time, I materialized Yukihiro Nigata in my right hand and took an overhand swing at her. *I’ve got her!*

“Not even close!” Her eight armored legs folded to catch Yukihiro Nigata.

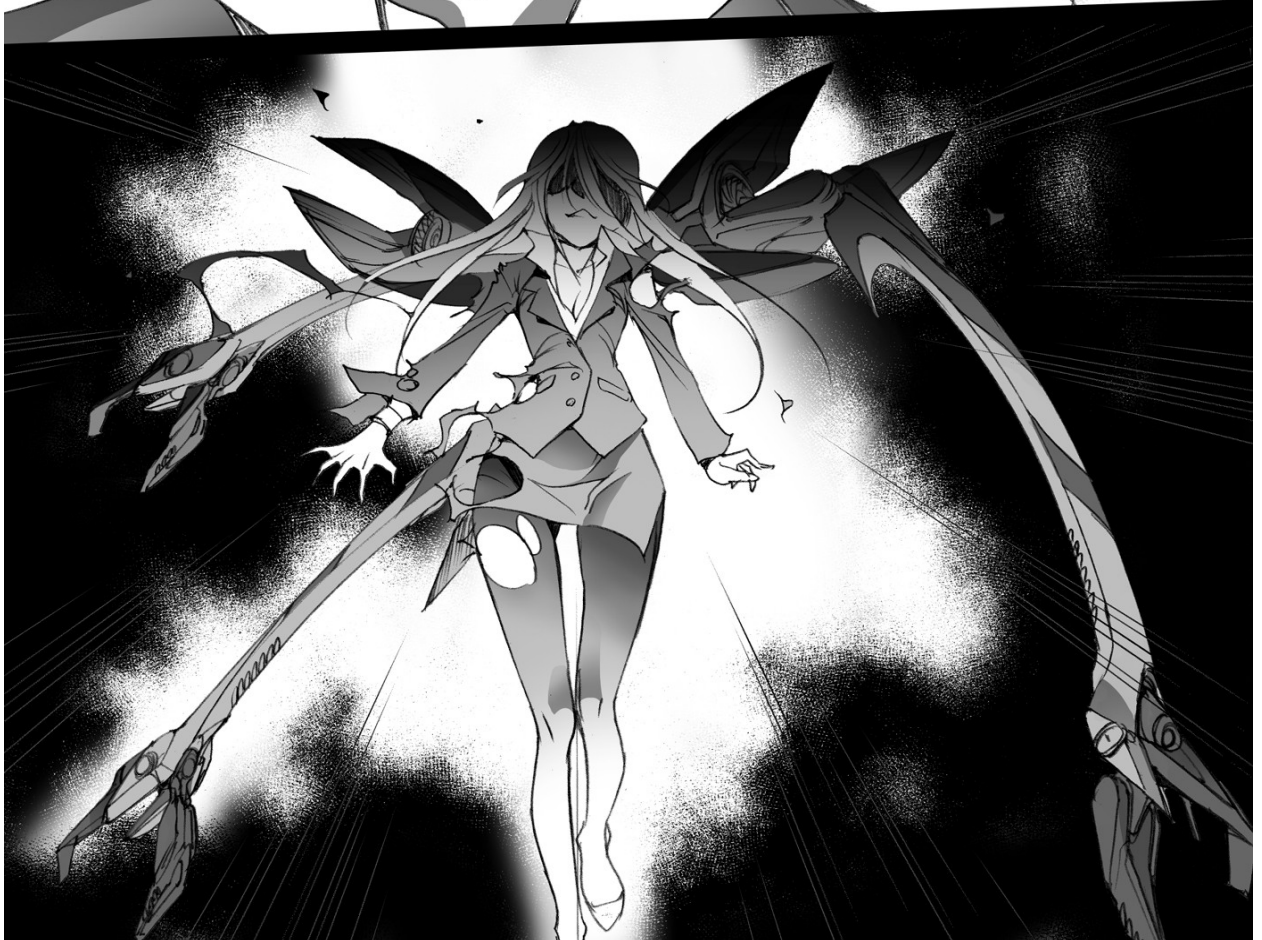
“Dammit!”

The legs wrapped around the blade, and I couldn’t finish my slash or pull it back. At the same time, Autumn materialized a machine gun in her hand and fired at me.

“Ugh!”







Bullet after bullet pierced my shields, and the shockwaves pummeled my body. The emergency defenses may have saved me, but they did nothing to dull the pain.

*I can't take much more of this!* Casting aside my weapons, I fired the retro rockets on my wing thrusters, hopping backward and into the air. As I twisted around the bullets, I kicked her gun into the air while wrenching Yukihiro Nigata back from her mechanical legs.

"Hahaha! Not bad, punk! Not many can escape my Arachne!"

"Shut up, will you!" There were plenty of obstacles in the locker room, but the training in manual control I'd gotten from Tatenashi let me weave past Autumn's attacks while closing in. Those lessons were really coming in handy. "URAAAH!"

"Whoa! That was close!"

Autumn's attacks hammered at me as I struggled to close the gap. It seemed like each of her mechanical legs had its own independent PIC, as the Arachne moved faster and more unpredictably than any IS I'd ever seen. Almost like a spider.

*I've got to predict her movement and cut her off with Ignition Boost! Using Circle Rondo strafing to evade the bullets raining down on me, I waited for my chance. Calm down. Calm down, and wait for the right timing. Then rush her and take her down.*

"Oh, right, I may as well tell you. We're the ones who kidnapped you during the second Mondo Grosso! What a touching reunion this is!"

".....!!"

My mind boiled over in rage as I heard her. Really? I see, then...

"Then I'll pay you back!"

"Such an inexperienced little boy. No subtlety, just rushing from the front like that... There!"

I barely noticed her weaving a cat's cradle of sorts between her fingertips before she flung it at me. The ball of energy wires burst before my eyes into a gigantic web.

"Ugh! Damn you!"

If it was energy, Setsura could cut through it! Or so I hoped... but it wrapped around me, disabling me within seconds.

"Hahaha! That was so easy! It's what you deserve for underestimating a spider's web!" As I struggled and squirmed, she strode toward me with a half-smirk on her face. In her hand was a device with four legs which I hadn't seen her use before. "And now for the fun part."

It was around 40 centimeters wide. With a whirring sound, its legs began to stretch out.

"Now, have you finished your goodbyes? Gyahaha!"

"To who?!"

The device latched onto me. Its legs wrapped firmly around my chest.

"To your IS, of course!"

"What?!" For a moment, it felt like electricity was coursing through my body. "GAAAAH!"

It felt like I was being torn apart. Every joint in my skeleton screamed in pain. Autumn's glowering smile as I twisted in agony chafed at me. I didn't understand how I could focus enough through the pain to resent it so much.

"And, done."

The feeling of shock evaporated, and the device unlatched from around me. At the same time, the web dissipated. *Now!* I put all my strength into a haymaker punch, but—

"You've got no chance, punk! Not without an IS!"

Instead, she kicked me, and I flew back into the lockers again. Only then did the pain make me realize. **Byakushiki was gone.**

"Wh-What's going on?! Byakushiki! Come on!"

Only my IS suit was left on me. Byakushiki's armor and weapons had disappeared.

"Hehehe, your precious IS is right here."

"What?!"

Autumn held up her hand, to show a diamond-shaped crystal. It was unmistakably Byakushiki's core. Its gleam, and its shape instead of the normal sphere, were more than enough proof.

"Remember that device? It's called a 'Remover!' It's a secret weapon that forcibly strips your IS away. Feel lucky that you got to see it while you were still alive!"

She kicked me twice more. I was too injured to stand, and could only glare at Autumn until she stepped on my face.

"Give... Give it back..."

"What was that? I can't hear you."

"GIVE IT BACK! Quit fucking with me!"

I'd finally worked up the strength to move again, and tried to sweep her legs out from under her.

"You're too slow!"

This time, she kicked me in my side. My back crunched into the wall, and I lost my breath. What was with her? Did she just like kicking people? To be honest, I didn't get it. It wasn't like her legs were all that great. And I should know; if there's anything I get to do all day, it's enjoy some beautiful legs.

*Ha... Hahaha... What the hell is going on? Is this what people get like when they crack?* I laughed bitterly to myself. It really was just the same. I was never strong enough. But— *But I still can't forgive that!* I wrapped my arms around her leg as she wound up for another kick, and pulled it close to me. At the same time, I reached out, grabbing for the IS core.

"Not happening!"

Her mechanical legs smashed me into the wall. *Dammit, dammit, dammit!*

“Anyway, punk. I’m done with you, so now I’m gonna finish you off.” Her grin was still plastered over her face as she said it.

“That would be unfortunate. I’ve taken quite a liking to Ichika here.”

I heard a voice which sounded entirely too cheerful for the situation. Looking over, and saw Tatenashi standing in the doorway. She was holding her fan, as usual.

“How did you get in here? I had everything locked down! Whatever! You saw me, so I’ll just have to kill you first!”

“Tatenashi!”

Autumn spun around to attack Tatenashi. Her eight armored legs stretched forth.

“I’m the head of the students here. So of course, I need to live up to that.”

“What in the world are you talking about?”

In the blink of an eye, Autumn’s mechanical legs tore through Tatenashi’s body.

## Chapter IV: Mysterious Lady

"Tatenashi! Shit, you killed Tatenashi!"

Tatenashi's expression remained unchanged, even with the mechanical legs impaling her. Looking more closely, I saw that not a drop of blood had spilled from her wounds.

"What's going on?! That felt like stabbing through nothing!"

"Fufufu." Tatenashi grinned, briefly, before fading into thin air with a hiss of steam.

"Was that just water?!"

"Correct. A decoy made of water." Tatenashi's voice, completely calm, called out from directly behind Autumn. As Autumn spun around, Tatenashi swung her lance in a wide arc.

"Ugh!"

"Oh, did I miss? That IS of yours is quite mobile, isn't it."

"Who the hell are you?!"

"Sarashiki Tatenashi. And the IS Mysterious Lady. Remember it well." Tatenashi grinned again.

Her IS was like none Ichika had ever seen before. Its armor was small and tight-fitting, but covering the gaps was a transparent fluid field, almost like a dress made purely of water. What caught my eye the most about the Mysterious Lady's unique appearance were the two crystalline parts floating at its sides. Those 'aqua crystals' extended a veil of water which swirled around Tatenashi like a cape. Wrapping around the massive lance in her hand was a spiral of water, which began to spin as if the entire thing was a drill.

"Gah! I'll kill you right here!"

"Ahaha. Playing the villain, are you? Don't you know that only assures my victory?"

Tatenashi plunged forward with her lance as she taunted Autumn, seeking to strike while warding off attacks with its bulk, parrying Arachne's eight mechanical legs and Autumn's own two arms with only a single weapon.

"Dammit! You're full of yourself, kid!" Autumn slipped a pair of katars out of sheathes on her hip armor, and swung with them as her mechanical legs returned fire in ranged mode.

"A scattershot attack like that will do nothing against water." The hail of fire was easily stopped by Tatenashi's veil. As each bullet struck, it froze within the flowing water, robbed of its momentum.

"That isn't just water!"

"My, you're a clever one. It's shaped by nanomachines which conduct my IS' energy. Impressive, if I do say so myself." Tatenashi stayed on the attack as she spoke, and Autumn's skillful attacks with the katars were parried with the lance, and even kicked down when they got too close.

"Just who the hell are you?!"

"I thought I already introduced myself."

"You stuck-up little bitch!"

Autumn's frustration began to get the better of her as she failed to land a single blow. Tatenashi, meanwhile, was the picture of perfect calm, maintaining absolute composure as she gradually ground forward.

"Did you know? The student council president is the strongest student here."







"Who gives a shit?!"

Autumn suddenly threw the katar from her left hand, leaping forward in the opening this created. At the same time as it struck Tatenashi, she kicked the lance downward toward the floor.

"Oh my."

"Eat this!" Autumn pressed the attack, four mechanical legs firing while the other four struck with their blades.

"Ah, yes. Intense indeed."

"Hahaha! Still feel like talking shit? 'Strongest'? Give me a break!"

Autumn was right. Tatenashi was beginning to stagger under the relentless assault. She may have had armor to rely on, but the strikes were beginning to land on it.

"Tatenashi!"

"Just rest, Ichika. Leave it all to me. All you have to do is believe."

"You stupid kid! Stop pretending you're not in deep shit!" Autumn had broken through Tatenashi's defenses, and delivered a crushing kick to her, sending her flying backwards. At the same time, she wove a web in her hands, and wrapped it around Tatenashi, trapping her. "You... You little... You're really a fuckin' handful... Kid!"

"Oh dear, I can't move."

"This time I've got you pinned down!" The joints of her eight mechanical legs clanked as they slowly extended toward Tatenashi. But there wasn't a single hint of panic or fear in her face.

"Hey, is it just me or is it getting hot in here?"

"What?"

"I mean, not actually hot, but it certainly feels that way."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You know, the heat index is based on humidity. So, I guess, is it just me or is it **humid** in here?"

".....?!"

It was only then that Autumn noticed the mist filling the room. A thick cloud of it wrapped around her body.

"Ahh, that's the expression I've been waiting to see. The moment when you realize your plan failed."

Tatenashi wore the unfathomable smile of a goddess. But behind it was all the certain doom of the Grim Reaper's skeletal leer.

"Mysterious Lady... The Lady of the Mists. It can control water as if it was an extension of itself. And, as I told you before, the nanomachines which do this can conduct energy straight from the IS."

"D-Dammit!"

"Too slow." Tatenashi snapped her fingers. In the next moment, Autumn was swallowed by an explosion. "Ahahah. Did you really think I told you that because I wanted to show off, or because I liked to overshare? I told you it because I wanted to see the look of shock on your face."

This was 'Clear Passion'—an attack which used the nanomachines flowing through the water to superheat it, enveloping the target in explosions. It may only be effective in a limited area, but every move she makes in a fight contributes to setting it up, so it's extremely useful in real combat.

"Guh... Ugh... This... This isn't over yet!"

"No, I'm pretty sure it is. Right, Ichika?"

Autumn, filled with dread, turned around. Before her was Ichika, grasping his right forearm while focusing intently.

"Come, Byakushiki!"

He was wrapped in light, then—



*Tatenashi said to 'believe.' She must have meant to believe in Byakushiki. I'd never seen something turn out so conveniently. But still, I believed it would this time. Byakushiki will respond. As long as... As long as I keep calling for it!*

"Come, Byakushiki!"

I focused intently on my right arm, and soon enough, I could see a warm glow even though my eyes were squeezed shut. Then... In my right hand, the core materialized—no, was summoned.

"Byakushiki, emergency materialization! Yukihiro Nigata, full power!"

The core's glow changed to particles of light which wrapped around me. The feeling in my hand changed from the core to the firm weight of a weapon and I opened my eyes. *I can do this!* Byakushiki was already fully materialized, and I synchronized my thoughts with it as I rushed at Autumn. As I raised my blade over my head, I felt Reiraku Byakuya activate.

"What the fuck?! How did you—"

"I don't even know! But take this!"

"GWAHH!"

Her eight mechanical legs came together, stopping my slash over her head. But I pressed harder, refusing to be stopped, and soon it carved through them.

"What the—"

I could see Autumn move in slow motion, framed by the wreckage of her IS' legs. No. She wasn't moving that slow. I was moving that fast.

"GUH!"

I landed a kick propelled by both Ignition Boost and my thrusters at full power, and Autumn flew back into the wall. It was forceful enough to leave cracks in the wall I could see into the next room through.

"Ichika, tie her up!"

"Got it!"

"D-Dammit... Is this the end?" Autumn muttered. With a sucking whoosh, her IS detached from her body onto the floor.

"What?!"

"ICHIKA!"

It began to glow, and a few seconds later erupted in a massive explosion. I was almost caught in it, but Tatenashi dove in front of me to keep me safe.

"Are you okay, Ichika?"

Her water veil had extended as far as possible to defend me. No matter how effective an IS' emergency defenses were, eating that at close range definitely would leave a mark.

"I... I think... Wait! Where'd she go?!"

"She got away. It looks like she recovered her IS' core just before the explosion, too. So only the weapons and armor detonated. That was really risky. If she failed, she would have blown herself up." Tatenashi was cool, matter-of-fact, rather than her usual playfulness.

"Really. Anyway, um..."

"Yes?"

"It'd be nice if you let me go."

The force of the explosion had pressed Tatenashi into me. Meaning... Her breasts were squeezed directly into my face, and, ummm—

"Aww. Ichika, you're such a pervert."

"Wait, no, it isn't like that! It's just, it was an emergency, so..."

"It's not very manly to make excuses like that, is it? Now tell me, what did you think of my breasts?"

"....."

"Nothing to say? That's so mean."

"Well, uh... They were soft... And..."

"Ichika."

"Yes?"

"You're such a pervert."

I gave up on arguing with her about it and hung my head. Today had just been too much. You know the feeling where you just want to go home and take a bath? That's how I felt.

"And what do we have here?" Tatenashi dangled a certain something from her fingertip as she teased me.

"Eh? The crown. What about it?"

"Ah, yes, the crown. The wonderful prize which grants its holder the right to live in Ichika's room."

"What?! Is that why all the girls wanted it so badly?"

"Yeah."

"How did you even come up with that? It's not even like it's any fun to live with me."

"Maybe, maybe not. Anyway, looks like I'm the one that ended up with it."

I had a bad feeling about what was gonna happen— no, what already had happened.

"So, looks like we're together for a little longer while, I-chi-ka!"

Mentally and physically exhausted, I slumped backwards.



*Shit! Shit, shit, shit! Autumn sprinted across the grounds of IS Academy while cursing bitterly to herself. This was supposed to be an easy job! That little whore set me up!*

Today's mission had gone off the rails before it had even started. The initial idea had been to catch Ichika in his dorm room, but his new roommate had meant a sudden change of plans.

*I knew she was bad news from the day she showed up!* Autumn's mind raced as she thought of her aloof, arrogant co-conspirator. The one whose haughtiness was visible in every gaze. The one who had designed the 'Remover,' and who had planned this mission.

*What the hell is the point of that thing, anyway? If he can summon his IS from outside its range, it's useless!* It was definitely useless now. Once an IS was hit with it once, it developed a resistance. *Wait! That must be it!* The process of the IS being removed developed that resistance. Then, because of the newfound resistance, it could be summoned from long range.

*I was set up to fail.* Autumn latched onto the conclusion that the girl who created the Remover must have understood that would happen. *I'll kill her! Kill, kill, kill! I can't believe she humiliated me like that!* Grinding her teeth in anger, she suddenly realized that she had escaped to a park outside IS Academy.

*Damn, I'm thirsty... I need to find some water...* Looking from left to right, her eyes eventually latched onto a fountain. Thinking she could spare a few moments, she swiftly walked toward it. *I'll kill that kid! I don't care what Squall has to say about it!*

Turning the spigot, she let water spray forth. Lapping up the flow like a dog, she turned her thoughts to how exactly she'd kill the new girl. *Nice and slow... Hee-hee...* Suddenly, she realized that the water flowing down her throat had stopped.

*What? Is it broken?* She looked back at the fountain and gasped incredulously. The water's flow was being blocked in midair.

"What?!"

The spatter of the water hitting what almost seemed like a transparent plank floating in the air was soaking Autumn's clothes, but she was more worried about something else. *This must be... AIC!* She tried to leap backward away from the fountain, but the AIC was already holding her feet down. Instead, she crumpled to the ground from the inertia.

"Shit! Is this that German IS?!"

"That's right, Phantom Task." Laura's quiet voice hung in the air. It was as chill and regal as a mountain glacier. "Don't move. Our sniper already has a bead drawn right between your eyes."

"Ugh!"

"Now spit it out. Everything about your organization."

Due to her military background, Laura had already known a small amount about Phantom Task. And now, there was this raid. And their use of IS. Phantom Task was shaping up to be a considerable foe.

"Your IS is a second generation American model. Where'd you get it? Tell me."

"I ain't telling you shit!"

The process of creating IS cores had never been revealed. Meaning, Autumn's must have been stolen from somewhere. However, the loss of even a single core was a major incident weakening national defenses, so its source wouldn't have revealed the theft. In any case, any organization capable of planning and executing a mission to hijack an IS must have had significant resources at its disposal.

"That's fine. I'm fairly experienced in conducting interrogations. So it looks like you and I are going to be spending a lot of time together."

Laura began to pace toward Autumn, but suddenly, Cecilia cut in over a private channel, "Get away from her! We've got a bogey closing in!"

"What...?" Just as Laura swept the area with her sensors, a laser struck her in the right shoulder. "Ugh!"

Quickly, she flipped up her eyepatch and activated the hypersensor-enhancing Wodan-Auge system. However, it was all she could do to avoid the following two laser shots.

"Laura! Get out of there!" Cecilia had already traced the shots back to their source, and lined up the oncoming IS in her sights. "Is... Is that—"

She recognized the form enlarged by her scope. It was the second BT IS, Silent Zephyrus. It was equipped with experimental shielding bits based off data gathered from its predecessor, Cecilia's own Blue Tears.

"What are you doing? Hurry up, Cecilia! Shoot!"

"Tch."

Cecilia squeezed off a few aimed shots with her laser rifle, but the bits repositioned to block the fire, preventing her from landing a clean hit. Scrambling for options, she deployed her own bits, only for the Silent Zephyrus to pick them out of the sky. *It can aim that precisely at full speed?! I can't believe its rate of fire!* Cecilia was shocked at being so cleanly outmatched. She didn't have much time to think, though, as the Silent Zephyrus's own bits circled around to her six.

"Then—" She fired her missile bits directly downward, planning to adjust their trajectories in midair and catch the incoming enemy in a blind spot. Cecilia was sure of success—until she saw something unbelievable happen. "Wha—"

*The beams bent in midair, shooting down each missile bit. Polarization trajectory control?! That's only possible with a BT weapon acting at full operational efficiency! It can't— She froze, dumbstruck at what she saw. I'm the active pilot with the highest BT compatibility! So how?!*

"What are you doing?! Don't let that hit you!"

Cecilia's breath caught. Laura body-checked Cecilia out of the way, taking the brunt of the laser barrage herself. It was only while watching the Schwarzer Regen's armor melt away that Cecilia snapped back to herself, but by then, the attacker had already made it to Autumn's side.

"Your ride's here, Autumn."

"Goddammit! Why do you have to be so casual about this!"

A hail of fire from a compact laser gatling kept Laura or Cecilia from closing in. At the same time, a glowing pink knife cut through the AIC field, freeing Autumn.

"Is this the best Advanced that German science can produce?"

The enemy pilot wore a visor-type hypersensor which revealed only her mouth. But Laura could see that it was twisted into a cruel smirk.

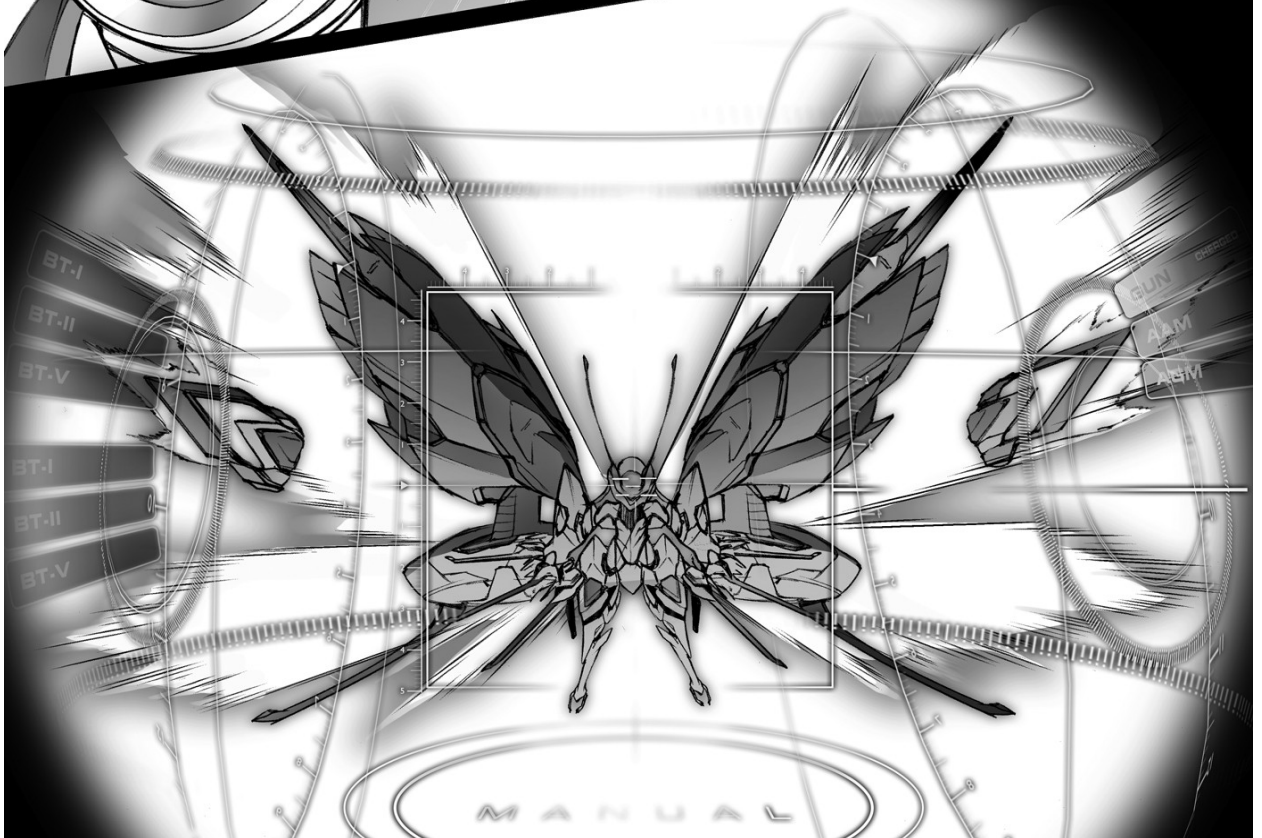
"Damn you! How do you know about that?!"

"I don't need to tell you. Anyway."

Holding Autumn, she soared into the air and away. A few moments later, the bits which were pinning Laura and Cecilia down self-destructed, their mission complete.

"Laura! Get a hold of the academy! I'll go after her!"







"No! You'll never catch up now. And in the condition we're in now, we'd never win."

"....."

Cecilia pursed her lips in frustration as she watched the enemy fly away. Soon enough, she was gone like the wind, leaving not a single trace. Laura and Cecilia each sensed a storm approaching.



"...And that's how it is."

"Phew..."

Nighttime, in my dorm room. With the school festival over, Tatenashi was giving me the details on what really happened. About how a shadowy organization had recently ramped up operations, and when it was determined to be targeting me, she had moved into my room as a protective measure.

"So... Just who are you really, Tatenashi?"

"A kind girl, the type you'd love to have as a big sister?"

"I'm already full up on those."

"I guess, but anyway. The Sarashiki family has always specialized in this sort of behind-the-scenes operation. Like, you understand the meaning of 'working in the shadows'?"

Working in the shadows—so, doing things behind the scenes that can't or shouldn't be officially acknowledged?

"So the Sarashikis work in the shadows to counter other groups working in the shadows? That's... pretty impressive."

Tatenashi giggled as she snapped her fan open. On it was written 'Semper paratus.' Sometimes I just had no answer for her...

"But now that that's dealt with, I can relax a bit."

"So you'll be changing rooms now? That's—" I cut myself off before I could finish with 'a relief.' I didn't want to think about how she'd react to hearing that. "...I'll be lonely."

Giggling, she replied, "Don't worry. I'll be here a little while longer. After all, I'm the one who ended up with the crown."

Ugh. Right, that happened.

"Even after I move out, you can come sleep over whenever you get lonely."

"No thanks, I think I'll be fine."

If I didn't at least say that, who knew where this conversation would go. I couldn't leave any openings for someone like her.

"Aww. I thought you'd appreciate the offer."

"Sure, sure. I'm turning the lights out."

"Mhm. Let's get a good night's sleep."

As the lights faded, I lay down in bed. I was exhausted, and I quickly began to drift off.

"Goodnight, Ichika. We've got a lot of work ahead of us."

That was the last thing I heard before falling asleep.



"Everyone, you did an excellent job at the school festival recently. I'm now going to announce the results of the voting."

Meaning, the results of the battle over me. I felt like I could hear the entire student body, all packed into the gym, gulp in nervous unison.

"Number one is... The student council's production of Cinderella!"

"**EHHHHH?**" Everyone's mouths hung open in surprise. A few seconds later, the crowd erupted in boos.

"That's cheating! No fair! Election fraud!"

"How'd it end up the student council? That doesn't even make any sense!"

"We worked so hard!"

After motioning for silence, Tatenashi continued, "The requirement to participate as an audience member was, after all, to vote for the student council. We did not require participation. You chose this for yourselves."

So that's what she was getting out of it... I wasn't shocked, so much as just in awe. That had been an extremely clever plan. But her explanation wasn't enough to quiet the booing.

"Please, please, calm down. As a member of the student council, Orimura Ichika will be assigned to liaison with each club as appropriate. Since he's a boy, he'll be unable to compete in varsity sports, but he will still be made available as a manager or assistant. Please fill out an application and submit it to the student council."

*Wait, what?*

"Well, I guess..."

"I suppose that's fair enough."

"Lucky us, our club had no chance of winning anyway."

I could hear a few mutters of acceptance from around me before the crowd erupted in campaigning for their club.

"All right, let's get him started at the soccer club!"

"What are you talking about? Lacrosse should be first!"

"There's the cooking club too."

"Here! Right over here! The tea ceremony club is right here!"

"The kendo club will be fine with taking him second."

"Judo! Ooh, pick judo! We need to work on our ground game!"

*C'mon, hold it! Why don't I get any input on this?!*

"Then, since there seem to be no objections, Orimura Ichika will be joining the student council under my direction." As Tatenashi concluded her proclamation, the crowd erupted in claps and cheers.

Eh? What? What the heck was this? I was on the student council? But I was being lent out to each club?

"And what do you mean, 'under your direction'?!"

I had a bad feeling about this. A very bad feeling.

*"Goodnight, Ichika. We've got a lot of work ahead of us."* I suddenly remembered her words last night. *Is this what she meant?!* I didn't know how serious she was about this whole thing. All I knew is that fighting it would help nothing.



"Congratulations on your appointment as student council vice president, Orimura Ichika!"

"Congraaaaaats..."

"Congratulations. I'm looking forward to working with you."

Tatenashi, Miss Casual, and Utsuho, in that order. After each congratulated me in her own way, they all set off party poppers.

We were in the student council room. A lavishly imposing desk was ensconced directly before the window. Like high rollers and bosses always had in the movies.

"Why, though?"

"Doesn't it tie up all the loose ends neatly? I mean, you had to join one club or another. The principal even suggested using my authority to force you into one."

"Well, y'know, if you joined a club... Maybe a few people would have given up..."

"But the vast majority would still have demanded your presence in theirs, I believe. Therefore, the student council has adopted this measure."

It seemed like they were quite used to finishing each other's sentences. Realizing that it was no use arguing any further, I slumped in my seat and said, "So you're not even gonna get my opinion on it..."

"Oh, could that be it? Are three gorgeous girls not enough for you?"

"She's kinda right... Orimu, you're surrounded by cuties here."

"I'm not entirely sure what they mean to imply by that, but I certainly think your duties here will serve as valuable experience in the future."

At least for now, it seemed like Utsuho was the only one who was taking this seriously. Resignedly, I started to ask her what those duties might be, "Um... So, I should start coming here after class every day?"

"For now, correct. Once we assign you to a club, you'll operate under their schedule."

"Got it."

"Oh, and may I ask you one thing?"

"Huh? What is it?"

For once, Utsuho seemed like she was dancing around the point. I watched her in curiosity as she opened her mouth to speak once, then twice, before finally squeezing it out.

"The friend you brought to the school festival. What was his name?"

"Huh? Oh, you mean Dan? That's Gotanda Dan. He goes to one of the local public high schools."

"I-I see. Is he the same age as you?"

"Yeah, he is."

"Two years younger..."

"Eh?"

"Oh, it's nothing. Thank you."

Utsuho gave a polite bow. Her cheeks looked a little red, but I must have been imagining it.

"All right! To commemorate a full meeting and celebrate Ichika's appointment as Vice President, I baked a cake. Shall we have some now?"

"Oooh. Sounds greaaaat."

"I'll start some tea, then."

"If you don't mind. Honne, could you fetch the plates?"

"Suuuure."

It seemed like whenever the three worked together, they each took the task matching their personality. The shortcake they laid out was, undeniably, delicious-looking.

"Then. Cheers!"

"Cheeeeers."

"Cheers."

"Aha... Hahaha... Cheers. Sigh..."

Thus began my life on the student council.



"Pardon me."

Tatenashi opened a weighty door and stepped into the principal's office. Night had already fallen, and the windows looked out upon the darkness.

"Ah, Sarashiki. Excellent timing." She was greeted by an older man with a kindly face. Officially, his wife was the Principal of IS Academy, but behind the scenes, this man was in charge. "Now, if I could have your report?"

The man rested his clasped hands on top of his ornate desk as he spoke. His hair was completely white, and his face was creased with wrinkles. His gentle demeanor had earned him the nickname of 'Conscience of the Academy.' This man who spent his days as a janitor—Kutsuwagi Juuzou—was in true control of everything which happened at IS Academy.

"First, about Orimura Ichika. His IS training is progressing satisfactorily." Tatenashi dispensed with her usual playfulness. "To be honest, I'm impressed. It only takes him a few tries to pick up anything I teach him. He's far quicker on the uptake than any girl I've worked with."

"I see. It must be because he's Ms. Orimura's brother."

Tatenashi sensed a hidden meaning behind that, but continued her report rather than probing at it, "Next, we've confirmed that Phantom Task is in possession of at least two IS. Of them, one has had its core extracted and is unlikely to be ready for action in the immediate future."

If you think of the core as the heart of an IS, then the armor would be the muscle. The extraction of the core means the loss of the body which had grown around it, and a relearning period while it adjusts to its new armor. They weren't something you can swap in and out like a battery.

"You've been working quite hard, Sarashiki."

"It's nothing. Valuable combat experience for my IS, if anything."

"Ah, right, the Russian design. So it has come together. I was worried that it would never turn out to be worthwhile, but I see it was the right decision to give it to you."

"The development team has contacted me several times about potential modifications, but I believe it's usable as-is."

"I'll leave it to you, then. Use it as you see fit."

After two or three more details about the school, Tatenashi finished her report, "That's all."

"Understood. I see you're as popular as ever."

"I *am* the student council president, after all," Tatenashi said with a chuckle. She grinned, and Juuzou responded with a broad smile. The tension between them faded like mist.

"Now, shall we have tea? I have a snack, too. I believe you'll be quite the fan."

At Juuzou's words, Tatenashi's face lit up in the way which only a teenaged girl's can.

"You're always so good at choosing snacks. I can't wait to try what you have today."

"Ahahaha, it's no big deal. I just choose what looks good."

"No, really, you are! Oh, right! I had brought tea with me too!"

"Oh, is it Nohotoke Utsuho's?"

"Indeed it is!"

"Ooh! Her tea is excellent. This will be a wonderful meal." Juuzou chirped with an enthusiasm unexpected from a man who was pushing 70.

The two sat facing each other across the table as if they were the dearest of friends. No one who walked in the room would ever guess that they were the two powers in control of IS Academy.

## Epilogue: Beginning of “The Story”

“What the FUCK was that supposed to be?!”

The was: a penthouse of a skyscraper, in a lavishly-decorated room, Autumn loomed over a girl.

“.....”

“Say something, goddammit! You little shit!” Autumn had pressed the girl up against a wall, but still couldn’t hold back her anger, and drew a knife from a sheath at her hip. “Maybe I should scar that pretty little face of yours.”

“Knock it off, Autumn. You’re distracting me.”

A beautiful woman had stepped out of the bathroom. Her hair was a golden blonde which seemed to sparkle in the light.

“Squall!”

“Losing your temper like that is just gonna give you gray hair. Calm down, Autumn.”

The woman—Squall—sat down on the sofa, still in her bathrobe. Autumn glared at Squall in frustration and said, “You knew this was gonna happen, didn’t you.”

“Yes.”

“Then why didn’t you tell me?! We... We’re—”

“I know, Autumn. I know. You’re my precious lover.”

“I... Fine. Just as long as you remember that.”

Autumn blushed as Squall’s smile dissipated her anger. Seeing her lover shyly shrink back like a little girl in front of her first crush made Squall smile again.

“Come over here, Autumn. I’ll wash your hair. You must be exhausted from today.”

“Y-Yeah.”

The girl watched them interact with a bored look on her face. *They’re soooo lame...* The girl, who had no time for friendship or affection, turned to leave with only coolness in her eyes.

“M. I’d like you to focus on IS maintenance for now. We’ve only just taken the Silent Zephyrus, so it will still need significant adjustment.”

“Understood.”

The girl called ‘M’ answered curtly, then closed the door behind her. Alone in the hallway, she closed her eyes and clutched her locket. *Not much longer... Only a little bit more...*

She’d been waiting so long. The moment she’d been longing for had almost arrived. *With this, I can begin my revenge... It’s almost time...* Soon, they would meet. *My sister, Orimura Chifuyu...* Unseen by anyone, her mouth twisted into a hideous snarl.

## **Afterword: “CHOCO’s Illustrations”**

Hi, It’s Yumizuru again! This time, I’d like to talk a little about the ABCs of writing a light novel.

When I only had to worry about my writing, I was free. I could work on things until I got them perfect. But when I got published, thinking about the art changed me. At first I worried, “Is it going to turn out like I imagined?” Depending on the artist’s capabilities, differences could appear—whether for the worse or for the better. But the artist’s visual concepts are also a powerful tool. The IS illustrator I’m working with now, CHOCO, is quite talented at coming up with amazing ideas in his illustrations. They’ve made major impacts on how I think of Akatsubaki, Byakushiki, and Blue Tears in particular.

Sometimes I wonder if this kind of reaction might be better suited to a pro wrestler than an author. That kind of interplay between talents. That “All right, we’re doing this live!” feeling. I guess not everyone gets hyped for that, but for what I’m writing it helps.

Just thinking about it is hyping me up. I don’t wanna get beaten out. But CHOCO’s amazing, so if I slack at all I’m done for. It’s hunt or be hunted—that kind of feeling. And I’ve got plenty up my sleeve. “Think you can draw this? Hahaha.” —type things. (I think.)


Anyway, what I really want to say is, “Share your fate with your illustrator! We can do it together, bro! Let’s be the best team there ever was! You’ve got my back!” or something.

CHOCO’s art really is beautiful. So I have to try my hardest to match it. Here goes!

— Izuru Yumizuru





<b>Subject</b> <b>Celebration of Vol. 5 Release</b>	<b>Date</b> : 2013 / Under a stationary front in the early Summer rainy season
<input type="checkbox"/> Rough <input type="checkbox"/> Cleanup <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Afterword	<b>Time</b> : This hand of mine burns with an awesome Jaeger!
<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; align-items: center;">  <div style="text-align: center;"> <b>CHOCO</b>  MUGITANI KOICHI </div> <div> <a href="http://chocolateshop-float.com">http://chocolateshop-float.com</a> </div> </div>	

The new girl Tatenashi strips down plenty of the times in the text too, but here's an extra-special uncensored version of her going even further.

Recently, I was at my alma mater MAU's manga club for a drawing lesson. The theme was 'drawing the female form'. By peeling it back to skeletal and muscular structure, you learn where needs to stick out and where gets pulled in.

Sometimes, I like to take time and volunteer to cultivate the hopes and dreams of those who follow after me by passing down my skills.

... Is what I like to say, but really, I'm there to seek out anyone who might come in handy and wheedle them into signing up as an assistant.

The workflow at Choco when drawing for IS is just like it would be for drawing manga, with assistants contributing to everything from backgrounds to first-pass painting, applying tone, and even putting together non-uniform outfits.

It's too  
damn  
muggy,  
time to  
strip  
down!



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by Izuru Yumizuru

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